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The Threshold

Evelyn Campbell

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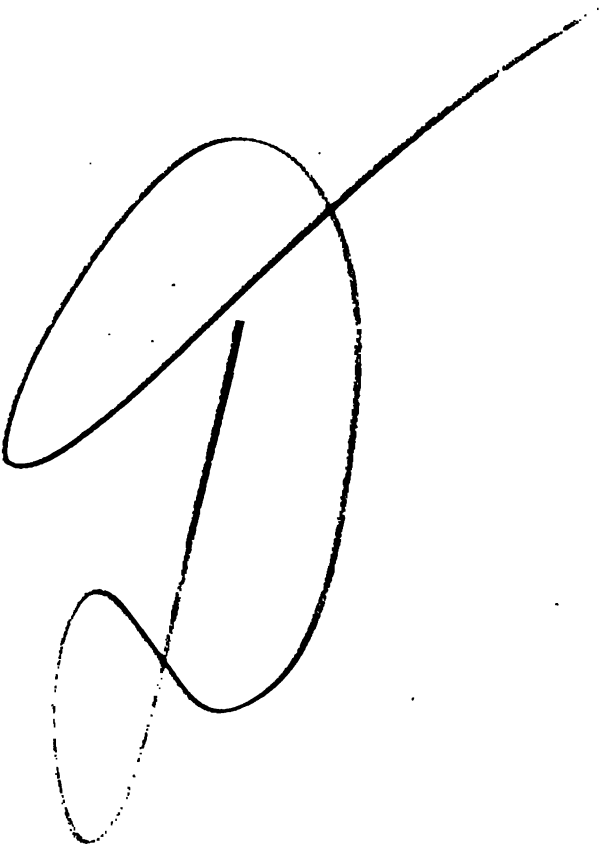

THE THRESHOLD

THE THRESHOLD

A NOVEL

By

EVELYN CAMPBELL

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1921

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THE THRESHOLD

CHAPTER I

WHEN the sunlight fell at a certain slant through the dingy windows, Roscoe Christy got up heavily from the horsehair cushioned armchair where he had been sitting most of the day and prepared to close his office.

This was a ceremony. First, he would replace the thick calfskin books whose pages, yellowed by age, lay open upon the table. The walls were lined with shelves that held hundreds of these books and he knew and jealously loved each one of them. He would have lingered over this, but habit made his hands too proficient. The books slipped into their grooves like machinery and soon the last of them took its place in an orderly row. After this he sorted and put away papers which had occupied and whiled away the hours of another day. They were all dusty and yellowed, like the books,—souvenirs of an era long passed . . . leases and briefs which every one else had forgotten. Nothing remained but to empty the water glass and turn it down upon the edge of the table.

By this time the sun had changed, leaving the room in a faint grayness like that of early dawn. It was still bright day out of doors, but these windows, veiled in grime, would not let the light through. He found the right key upon a crowded ring and went out, carefully locking the door after him.

The office was in one of the old buildings which were a part of the old Cresston, and the street on which he emerged was full of mean little business enterprises that seemed to be hiding here from the relentless spirit of renovation and expansion which had laid hands on the town and was swiftly metamorphosizing it. Not so long ago Horton Street had been no worse than its neighbors, but now its shabbiness was pitilessly betrayed by the magnificence of a new department store which stood at the corner, a scant block away.

He turned from this unsightliness into the broad square which had been named for his family. In the center of it the Courthouse stood with a majestic display of Gothic columns which had cost the tax payers of Cresston dear. The long, grassy slope of the lawn, shaded by ancient trees that were never trimmed, was a favorite lobby for the men who talked over the affairs of the nation in the open, and for loungers who fed on stray bits of gossip, and for small boys who did errands for a penny. But at this hour the lawn was empty and the shade of the great trees had turned it into dim aisles of coolness and beauty. Stray bits of paper moving in the breeze that came from the hot west were lifted lazily, like white butterflies hovering in the deep shadow. . . .

The old building, the old, old trees, and the greensward were like an oasis rimmed by the bright glittering of the modern buildings that faced the Courthouse from four directions. When Christy Square was named, the Courthouse had been magnificent, but now its greatness was submerged like the dreams of childhood which dwindle before the realism of age. The Sheridan Building, pointing upward like a white shaft, caught the sun upon its glittering window panes and seemed to look with tolerant wisdom

upon its lowlier neighbors. The Merchants' Bank, frowning coldly behind its marble mask, waited in sphinx-like calm for old traditions to fall. The new façades of new shops, shaded by gay awnings, drew aloof in their bright busyness from this dignified monument of old-fashioned days.

Roscoe Christy did not pause on his way through the Square but his eyes were fastened furtively on the building, eagerly marking an open window here and there, small signs that the place was not altogether deserted, or that some one had been negligent. He always wanted to stand before the Courthouse, like a lover at a window, but he never did. He had lived in Cresston too long not to fear its ridicule.

The streets leading away from the Square were filling with a slow and dwindling procession of home-goers who tried to find shelter beneath the deep elms that lined the shady avenues. Nearly all of these were men, for Cresston was an old-fashioned community where women's occupations kept them in four walls at that hour, and each of these men was going home to a woman who waited for him. Some were young, with the buoyancy which even a hot day could not conquer, but for one like this there were many of the sort of which such processions are made: grayish, a little round-shouldered, with baggy knees; every one with an evening paper and sometimes a parcel or two. There was little to distinguish one from another, for even their footfalls seemed to sink into a rhythm of motion that kept them an even distance from one another. These were the married men of Cresston going home to supper and they kept the threads of smoke going upward from their chimneys by the thousand and one occupations which the smallest town affords. During other hours they vanished mysteriously. Like all other towns, Cresston seemed to get its work

finished by gnome-like methods, but at five o'clock the workers were always going by with their newspapers and little parcels, greeting each other with dry nods in a sort of queer brotherhood which begins at the marriage license bureau.

As Roscoe Christy, passing diagonally through the Square, turned into Armitage Street, he nodded to many men and was nodded to in turn by others; sometimes he met the fleeting smile with which people recognize a familiar figure that is actually unknown to them. It was only to the new element which had appeared in Cresston since the war that his face was unknown. These people, these complacent, efficient strangers who walked briskly in spite of the heat, he observed without interest, or failed to see at all.

In Armitage Street the elms were wider branched as the street itself was broader, and in the deep shade he took off his panama hat and fanned himself as he walked along, marking the changes of the day just finished.

It was a beautiful old street in a gay new gown, beneath which some of its charm was lost, though to the people who lived there, most of them gay, young married folk, glad enough to be done with gray old ways, it seemed old and staid enough still. Once the pretentious houses had stood almost a block apart, but now they were building new bungalows and villas behind the guarding elms along its length. He hated the sound of the hammering which portended the new phase which had overtaken Cresston. It meant that life was flying by and would stop for no one who lingered in the race. . . .

He passed the Pendleton house which had a large "For Sale" sign tacked upon the railing of its gray, deserted veranda. The family had moved away the week before, to live upon a five acre tract upon the wrong side of town.

They claimed that the house was too large for them, and Mrs. Major Pendleton and her widowed daughter Rosalie were going into the chicken business—for their health, they said, but this deceived nobody. It was known that the Pendletons were ruined.

An old negro man, with hair as white as cotton and a wrinkled face, was pushing a lawn mower back and forth across the Withrow lawn, and the clatter of the machine sent out a pleasant, musical rhythm as it advanced and retreated over the velvet grass. Colonel Withrow, tall and elegant in his linen clothes, followed the mower with the sprinkling hose, always watching hopefully for a tuft of grass left uncut, but never finding it. When he saw his old friend approaching he gave the hose to the negro, who willingly abandoned the heavy mower, and went to the edge of the lawn where an iron fence with needle-like pickets separated the grounds from the trespass of the town.

"A warm day, a warm day, Roscoe," said the Colonel, when the other was near enough for greeting. He wiped his heated face with a fine linen handkerchief and flicked it delicately in the air, his eyes lingering on the languid movements of the hose wielder. "It is an outrage that a man of my years should be forced to follow a lazy negro around on a day like this, but if I left that fellow alone this lawn would look as though a woman had been over it with a pair of scissors. You can't trust to hired help in these days."

"You've had that negro in your family for twenty-five years."

"But he's changed. He's not the same negro he used to be. He looks the same, Roscoe, but he's changed, like everything else." In one mind they looked along the street at the white frames of new houses going up like magic

among the trees; the hammering had ceased. But, when their eyes met, each refused to recognize the gray and aging face that replaced the youth he used to know. They could not see that they were changing, too.

"I suppose you have heard the news about my son, Peter," said the Colonel after a slight pause. "I will not pretend that I am pleased. To an old friend I may even declare myself seriously annoyed. In my opinion young Harkness is an upstart, a complacent upstart who from the beginning has not scrupled to win his way at anybody's cost. In mentioning this to my son I emphasized the fact that it was distinctly unpleasant to see my name linked with that of Harkness, but this made no impression. Peter merely reminded me that the young man's brilliant war record wiped out all class distinctions. In the end I could only yield."

"You refer to the law partnership of your son and young Cleve Harkness?" inquired Judge Christy. After a pause he added, with grim if unwilling justice, "He has a bright mind. . . . It is possible for him to go far in such days as these."

They were silent, both thinking with some bewilderment of the present era in which youth, with effortless ease, leaps beyond the experience of age. But while they admitted this marvel they held tenaciously to a secret contempt for endeavors that must surely fail. When the subject seemed to be dismissed Roscoe Christy returned to it. "They are to settle in the new Sheridan Building, I hear."

"Oh, yes," the Colonel returned with some pomposity, "Peter thinks nothing of money when he is gratifying a fresh fancy, and naturally the other, coming from the stock he does, will go in for show and extravagance."

Young Peter Withrow, inheriting a large fortune from his mother's father, annoyed his own parent unreasonably

by a persistent independence of action. The Colonel would have scorned the suggestion that he was a little jealous, but Peter's money remained a thorn in his side, only a little less piercing than Peter's outrageous behavior.

A long gray roadster came slipping into the quiet street and paused humming softly at the curb. The driver, a young man with a pleasant, quizzical face and eyes that were a little near-sighted behind strong glasses, nodded to the two elderly men who watched him disapprovingly. When he joined them the Colonel said in a reproachful tone:

"Judge Christy has been asking about your arrangement with Cleve Harkness, but of course I could tell him very little,—only what I have heard from disinterested parties."

Peter Withrow laughed easily. He had a pleasant laugh that showed good white teeth. He recognized his father's little weakness.

"There isn't anything to tell," he said, "only that two impudent youngsters are going after the old dog's bones." Then he turned to Judge Christy, abandoning his light mood, "Is it true, Judge, that you are to be named in the Primary? I heard the report to-day, but I believed you were out of politics for good."

Colonel Withrow looked anxiously from his son to his friend. He knew that Peter was treading on delicate ground and wanted to warn him with a look that the subject of politics was one to be avoided. He felt a sensitive sympathy for the man who had fed on wormwood instead of the sweetmeats of public favor and he spoke sharply. "This town is made up of gossiping old women. No one's affairs are safe."

But Roscoe Christy stood looking down at his dusty boots without denial or affirmation. All day he had been asking

himself a question as he poured over his useless files, and, now that another voiced it, the answer appeared logically before him. Peter's brown shoes, meticulously well kept, within a yard of his own worn half soles may have unconsciously dominated his resolve. But there was no unbending of pride in his answer.

"Your information was correct, sir. I have been asked to represent my party in the coming election and I shall accept the nomination if it is offered me. I thought that I was out of politics, as you say, but that was a mistake. As a citizen of town or country, a man is at the service of his fellow men while he can do his duty by them,—and this I shall try to do if I am returned. If the subject is discussed again in your hearing, you may give out this information. . . . Jasper, I see that your negro has dropped that hose without turning off the water and the sod is being torn by the stream. You are right; the race cannot be trusted any longer."

He broke off suddenly as though he had said more than the subject of the negro's delinquency could cover, and with a brusk leave-taking went on his way.

"You'll be elected, never fear, Judge," Peter called after him cheerily, but he did not seem to hear. The Colonel, forgetting his precious turf, looked wistfully into the past and Peter grumbled under his breath, "I wonder why the poor old fellow never made a success of things?"

As the father and son walked up the flagged path to the house, the former said gravely, "Success has its favorites. The whipper-snapper you have linked your honored name with may become a Cabinet member, when by heredity he should be varnishing chairs and tables, while yonder goes a man who was born to rule a state."

They looked again, but he had passed out of sight beyond the drooping elms whose branches almost touched across the street like the feeble clasp of old fingers. The Colonel added firmly, "Yes, sir, he ought to rule a state, and he cannot pay his office rent. What is justice?"

CHAPTER II

FROM one corner of the Christy premises a bird's-eye view of Armitage Street could be had, and young Donnie Christy, gazing pensively on the early evening prospect from his vantage point upon the post, beheld among others the homecoming figure of his father. It was part of his secret boy-business to watch for approaches from this look-out, and, discovery being contrary to his plans, he dropped like a plummet from the post and went quietly through the tangled orchard until he reached the plum grove near the back of the house.

His mother was there with a neighbor, Mrs. Stevens, a young married woman who was perpetually talking of her three children and the plans she and her husband had made for their future. Donnie loved to hear these predictions, which seemed to hint at some magic power, and when he saw Mrs. Stevens he stopped to listen.

There were six plum trees in the group which Mrs. Christy loved to call "the grove," and the two women had been gathering fruit, small, plump, red globes, into a shallow pan which Mrs. Stevens held with an air of mentally weighing its contents. She had, it appeared, grown ambitious on the subject of jelly.

"When I tasted that glass you sent over to Gran'ma Dale, I vowed I never would let a summer go by without putting up a few dozen of your plums," she said, and added politely, "Of course, if you can spare them."

Mrs. Christy delivered choice fruit by threes and fours to the granite pan. "I'm not putting up much fruit the last year or two," she said. "The children are growing up until they don't care for jelly as they did."

For years the plentiful fruit upon the Christy place had been free to those who came with baskets to gather it. Mrs. Christy always assisted, apologizing for the poor quality of the fruit with the excuse that the Judge had no time to trim or prune. This was a fallacy accepted in the same spirit it was given. The Judge had plenty of time, only the condition of the trees was emblematic of the deeper, wider-spreading ruin which had befallen the family; but Mrs. Stevens, a newcomer in Cresston, knew nothing of these gentle traditions. She admitted that she could hardly "place" the Christys, but in the secrecy of her thoughts she gave them pity. The situation was approaching a delicate angle, and two high spots of color appeared on the visitor's cheeks.

"I couldn't think of accepting these plums without making some return," she began, in a thin, unnatural voice. "What are plums selling for, Mrs. Christy?"

Mrs. Christy, meeting a distinct situation, became calm. Her once pretty mouth drew into a firm line that was somehow ascetic and sweet. She knew that money was about to be offered for the plums by one who might be termed an innocent purchaser and she debated with herself whether to take it. It was very difficult, but she steeled herself to the demand and silenced the conscience which reminded her that the shallow pan of fruit belonged to the poorest yield the grove had offered for years. But Mrs. Stevens would undoubtedly offer as much as forty cents, and it strengthened her to enumerate in her mind how many small, important things forty cents would buy. The plums had always

rotted or been given away and to be paid for them was like finding the money lying in the grass.

Donnie, in the background, looked anxiously at his mother. Even he recognized a situation that seemed to place Mrs. Christy in the position of a market gardener, but he was relieved when he heard her saying coolly, "I could not say . . . It has not been a trouble, Mrs. Stevens, you are quite welcome to the plums."

But the purchaser, unsuspicious of the truth, rejected this alternative with energy. "But William wouldn't have it that way. He can't be beholden to any one, and I'd hate to tell him these plums were a gift I deliberately asked for. Do you think fifty cents would be too much?"

Mrs. Christy gasped with the sensation of cold water in her face. Having been mentioned, the sum sounded both arrogant and small. As the price of her pride it was infinitesimal and she longed to repudiate it utterly, but a strain of stubbornness in her nature held her to her purpose.

"I wouldn't say they were worth fifty cents," she murmured evenly, her eyes on the pan, "forty might be reasonable."

In a moment the transaction was completed. Mrs. Stevens counted over four dimes, one more than she had meant to give, and in a little while departed. "The fruit is a little over ripe," she said, acidulously, as she opened the gate, "I wish you had gathered the greener ones."

Mrs. Christy stood with the four dimes against her palm, looking at the evening sky which showed a faint smudge of smoke from the kitchen fire, and Donnie, yielding to an inner urge, came and stood close to his mother.

"Gee," he said, furtively, "what'd you sell them old sour plums for?" He watched her face wonderingly, as though the familiar presence had suddenly become enigmatic.

"What of it?" She turned on him in swift defense. There was something half childish in Mrs. Christy which made argument with Donnie an understandable thing. "Why shouldn't I sell them? Is there any one in Cresston who isn't selling things,—anything? It's the way people get rich! I—I—wish I'd been selling plums all these years. . . . Who cares for the things they get for nothing?"

But this was beyond Donnie's perspective, though it suggested a fact which hurled him suddenly from illusion. He had no language in which to clothe his discouragement; he could only shift from one foot to the other in his favorite attitude. "Gee, Ma," he whispered, "Gee! I thought we was rich." And then because it has been provided that the hearts of little children shall not be sorrowful, he quickly forgot what he could not understand. "Pa's comin'," he announced, remembering his reason for seeking her.

The excitement Mrs. Christy had shown in defending her action died swiftly. She became at once the familiar person of every day. She became conscious of the money in her hand.

"It's a little early for him," she exclaimed, in a pleasant flurry that entirely banished the subject of plums. "I wonder if something has gone wrong in town. Everybody tries to make it hard for your Pa. He has so many law cases and folks are so hard to deal with, I suppose he's all tired out." Then as she noticed for the first time a flicker of incredulity in the eyes of her son, she added forcefully, "Wait until you're a lawyer yourself, with people after you morning and night,—you'll know, then."

"I'll not be any lawyer when I grow up."

"Donnie!" His mother's shocked voice accused him of treason, but he endured it dumbly, digging his toe in the trodden grass beneath the plum trees. He was astonished

when she changed the subject brightly. "I'm going to make your father some strong coffee for his supper," she explained. "I expect he's all tired out and coffee always rests him. And you,—hurry now! Run over to Poland's shop and get some nice round steak; take this money. It's just enough. Hurry, now."

He obeyed. At the corner a scouting boy whistled between his bent fingers, the long blast and the two short ones that meant important business at hand. But Donnie with his cap over his eyes, signaled a grudging answer. He was not interested in boy-business at that moment, for his mind was occupied with a complex question to which there seemed no answer. Everything he had known and believed in became twisted and unreal and for no reason that he could see. His father was a great lawyer and Christy Square was named after his family. That alone had given him prestige which he accepted naturally as his right. . . . But his mother sold plums to Mrs. Stevens, whose husband drove a feed wagon on busy days. He could not reconcile these inconsistencies and the effort crowded and saddened his mind. It gave him some relief, however, to repeat his threat though he had only himself for audience. "I'll not be a lawyer for them," said Donnie, going home through the alley with his butcher's package; "driving a wagon is a lot more fun."

The Christys, because of diverse ages and tastes, were rather a silent family at meals, and it was not until supper was nearly over that Judge Christy began to speak, addressing his wife who was his invariable audience. To him she was not an individual but a concourse of vague, indistinct figures who, in his imagination, listened meekly to his diatribes. Mrs. Christy, helpless to release herself, writhed

beneath this implication of plurality without considering rebellion.

"I said to Wickersham in the middle of the Mahoney case, 'Sir, if this decision is for the defendant, it will prove that there is a menace beneath our politics darker than murder or bloodshed,—for actual crime can be sought out and punished, but intrigue, dishonor and infamy can hide themselves forever beneath a silver dollar.' I told him that, madam, and what happened?" He began in the middle of his stormy story as though his wife, whose intellect struggled vainly to keep pace with his own, could fill the lapse by her own deduction. . . . The poor lady was trying to remember if a pan of biscuits had been left in the range, but not daring to investigate she tried to assume a curiosity she was far from feeling, admitting helplessly that she could not imagine what had happened.

"The verdict came in for Mahoney, of course. I could not believe the news when I heard it. I said it was a lie. I warned Wickersham what it would mean to the town, and he laughed. Laughed in my face! If it had not been for Canfield . . . he took me off in a corner and said to me, 'Now, Roscoe, now, Judge! You can't do anything with the party which has the upper hand, and these new people have it. They are in control of the town!' After a moment I was calm, I saw that he was right. But after all, it was lucky I was not carrying a firearm."

Mrs. Christy flinched as she never failed to flinch at that threat. "Oh, Roscoe, don't say that! There's so many who would hold it against you if they heard—"

"Never mind. If all the shysters and tricksters were shot down as they deserve the world would be better off. Politics! The very word is a farce. The day of politics is

over. We're handled like so many sacks of cornmeal—Think of a man like Jasper Withrow, cultivated, a gentleman, and a member of Congress at thirty-five, yet dependent on his son's bounty. What brought him so low but politics? Yet we see the upstarts thriving on every side—"

At this pause, Antonia, who sat at his right hand, made a movement to rise but he ordered her to keep her place. She obeyed with an expression of slight disdain that changed the current of his thoughts. . . .

"Why don't you help your mother more? I saw her ironing for you the other day—ironing! It never hurt a girl to work around the house a little. When your mother was young she had a negro at her elbow every second, yet she could always get up a meal on mighty little." His glance roved over the table, and Antonia, who was not afraid of his tirades, confirmed this in her low, rich voice.

"That is a special talent of my mother's."

But Mrs. Christy, aroused from her apathetic rôle by the possibility of conflict between these two, hastened to present her own breast to the breach.

"I don't want Antonia to do kitchen work. There's little enough of it. And if she marries any Cresston young man she'll have plenty of her own."

Antonia's delicate dark face tilted slightly forward as though to conceal the thoughts that were mirrored there; at her mother's words she flushed faintly and her long lashes unveiled a glance of defiance. "You know that I want to work, father," she said, quietly.

She had offered this solution before, and the result was always the same. Her father's face turned purple and he made a furious gesture, as though striking out at some invisible presence before which his arm was futile. But the effect of his anger was made ridiculous by the crumbs

upon his waistcoat, and Antonia did not shrink from him. He shouted: "I have told you not to repeat that insolence! Your place is here with your mother, as a modest young woman. Where do you get these notions? Let me hear no more of them." The tirade ended limply; they had heard it so often before. Mrs. Christy folded and unfolded her napkin and Antonia looked from beneath her heavy lids at nothing. He coughed a little and went out on the front porch with the evening paper.

"Why do you aggravate your father," fretted Mrs. Christy, searching through kitchen shelves for clean towels. "It's like bitter root for him to think of you clerking in a store. There never was a Christy woman yet who worked out. Stop, Antonia, why won't you take this towel and let me put my hands in that hot water?"

Antonia laughed. She looked beautiful washing dishes, and with laughter she became a vibrant thing of light and color. As she splashed and rinsed the china she mocked her mother.

"And who are the Christys to-day, mother dear? What about the plums you sold to buy our supper? Why shouldn't I be the first to work—if it would save you—save you—"

Her voice broke like a string keyed too high; her eyes misted; she bent her face over the steaming pan, pretending that the moisture came from there. But her mother beamed happily. She loved to plan, and never having outgrown fairy tales, she at once saw herself clothed and jeweled by the hand of her daughter. "You dear child," she murmured ecstatically, "I know you'd give me everything if you could."

They silently busied themselves with the dishes for awhile and when the work was finished Antonia went to

her mother and dropped a swift kiss on the parting of her pretty hair.

"I'm going for a little stroll, mother."

"Alone?"

Mrs. Christy's voice was slightly wistful. Antonia was always alone; she did not make friends with girls who gave parties and had callers every night. This isolation always saddened her mother who loved laughter and light.

"I will not be long," Antonia promised. She did not understand; she thought that her mother was lonely and missed her when she was gone for a little while.

In the soft early twilight she stood irresolutely upon the doorstep. One way lay along the wide elm-shaded street, but a secret call sent her strolling through the thick darkness of the orchard to the fence corner that commanded a long view of Armitage Street, lighted here and there along its shadowy lane with bluish arc lights that cast a ghastly aura over the earth and made a haven of delight for millions of mad insects. From the next block some one turned rapidly into the street, and his footsteps rapping smartly against the pavement, approached the corner where Antonia stood half hidden by the fence and foliage. Her light dress was an indistinct patch of gray against the dark trees and the passer-by was almost abreast, his eyes fixed upon distance, when an indistinct movement of her blurred outline called to his drowned consciousness. It was only Antonia putting her hands to her hair, but to him it was a gesture that called him to her side.

"Antonia! Why didn't you speak? I might have passed without seeing you!"

"How could I be sure that it was you, Cleve?"

The bluish light from the street lamp revealed the immaculate whiteness of tennis flannels, inevitable summer

evening dress of Cresston. She had thought of him in khaki for so long that the change seemed to put a distance between them which had not existed before. She moved further back into the shadow.

"Don't stop. You are going to a party."

He smiled and came closer, peering into the shadow in pursuit of her. "Not a party . . . just an hour at Dupagny's," he explained rapidly. "Peter and I are looking after some of Dupagny's business, and of course I must go there when they make a point of it."

She murmured indistinctly, "Of course you must go."

He came an eager step nearer. Everything he did was eager and interested and full of life. "I know what you are thinking, Antonia. After that wonderful talk we had the other day! But you are wrong. I don't really care about the silly parties and the silly women who give them, and after I get into harness and the fight begins, I intend to drop it all. I haven't forgotten a thing you said. Nobody—no girl ever spoke to me like that—about the future and its opportunities and all that. . . . By Jove, you are wonderful! I went to sleep that night pounding at a volume of Decisions and woke up feeling that I could conquer the world. . . . I'm in earnest, Antonia, about cutting dances and tennis, and it's all because of that bully lecture of yours."

It was much of Cleve Harkness' charm that he was always in earnest over what interested him at the moment. He did not play or quibble with words and this gave the ring of authenticity to all that he said. This frankness carried him into hearts from which he might have been excluded for a number of very excellent reasons. He was believed.

Otherwise, he was a good looking young fellow, clean

and blond, with an attractive mouth set above a well cut chin. He looked amazingly well in his clothes, and those who remembered the patched trousers of his boyhood forgot them at sight of his first tailored coat. He was so intent upon convincing Antonia of his earnest purpose that he sought her hand through the fence and held it in a warm clasp while he repeated, "You were wonderful!"

"I did not intend to lecture," she said faintly.

"Antonia! . . . You serious little thing." His voice dropped to a murmur, "I have hardly seen you since I returned—and if you knew what your letters meant to me when I was across! Our talks have been so few, you must not blame me for treasuring what you say. Antonia . . . will you—will you—be here when I return . . . it's only for an hour. . . ."

She withdrew her hand so quietly that he hardly knew when it was gone. "I must go now. . . . Mother will be calling me. I did not think of seeing you to-night." She was turning away when with a dexterous movement he caught her hand once more and drew her into the light.

"Don't be cross. I wonder why I'm always offending you. I did not mean to suggest your waiting. . . . It's only that I want so confoundedly to see you, and after an hour with those people . . . it would be glorious."

It was impossible to remain offended. She surrendered her hand, protected from closer contact by the palings, ancient and impregnable. "You must go, Cleve. They will be waiting for you, and—and—you must not try to get away too soon. You are sure to have a good time—"

"Antonia!"

Her face was close enough to see now, and her wide, dark eyes looked like patches of black velvet in the smooth

pallor of her face; there were little golden specks deep in the pupils—like fireflies.

"Antonia, you know I don't care about society—Cresston society, and all that rot. Surely you don't think so badly of me as that! It is only that these people have their place—you have to get on with them. I want money and success—most of all, success, and I'm going to have it very soon. Money isn't enough. Peter has money but it hasn't brought the other things—because he doesn't care! That's why we are going to be heard from, he and I! I haven't a thing to bring into the firm by myself, and I'm only important because I *care* such a lot. I want to get ahead and I'll take poor old Peter with me, money and all. To get this, everything, everybody is important, even those people on Dupagny's veranda to-night." He laughed with boyish boastfulness. "Suppose I'm a Judge some day, Antonia. . . . Won't you tremble to think how you bullied me in your time?"

But she did not join his jesting gayety. Something sad and poignant crept across the moment. She drew her hand away finally. "I must go," she said, and vanished against the dusky screen that opened to receive her.

He called twice in a hushed voice, but she did not return to him and presently he went on his way, walking a little faster to make up for the time lost. He was used to Antonia and her queer ways, so unlike the ways of other girls, but to-night he was a little hurt by her reception of his confidence. They had known each other as boys and girls must in a town like Cresston, and from their bickering school days there had been a bond of unspoken allegiance between them. The past two years, which he had spent as all young Americans spent their time after the entrance of their

country into the world war, had cast Cleve about like a shuttle-cock and left Antonia marooned in the backwater of a small town, but he was accustomed, when he remembered her, to think of her as a fountain of understanding and sympathy. Yet to-night she had received his small confidence almost with abruptness. He was at an age when he believed women rather mysterious, but Antonia puzzled him more than any other. . . . Then he reached the Dupagny house and in its lights and gayety was swallowed up, swiftly forgetting. . . .

Antonia, making her way back to the house through the dewy darkness, almost stumbled over her young brother sitting in a hunched position upon the lowest porch step.

"Why, Donnie." She steadied herself and reproved him, elder sister fashion. "Why aren't you in bed? It must be nearly nine."

"I'm just goin'. There isn't any fun stayin' up to-night."

She sat down beside him, dropping her long arm across his thin little boy shoulders. "Why not, Donnie? It's a lovely night, I think."

"Lovely for some folks. Sis, I wish you wouldn't stand in my fence corner to talk to folks. My crowd was just gettin' together when you come along and stood there. We hung around waitin' but when Cleve Harkness came we gave it up. You could have sat on the porch with him as well as not."

Her arm fell away from its half caress. She sat upright. "Donnie, you didn't spy on me?"

"No. But it was my post—"

Their mother came out on the porch and joined them, sitting down limply in a sway back rocker that embraced her gently. Her voice wavered as she cautioned them to silence. "Your Pa's going to bed early. I don't think I

ever saw him so worn out. You must not talk loud . . . he hears every sound." She fanned herself exhaustedly with a newspaper which the Judge himself had left beside the chair. "I found out at last what's been worrying him so lately." She waited for their questions but they said nothing. "He dropped a word or two to-night. . . . They're getting the Democratic ticket ready for election. Colonel Wickersham and that crowd. They've been after your father to run for office again and it's just about upset him completely. It's the money. He can't make up his mind to let the office go, yet I'd rather starve than see him belittled."

Antonia's voice came softly from the darkness that enfolded her. "What is the office?"

"For—for—judge—"

Donnie stirred; he caught only one phrase of what she said. "But, ma, won't that be bully? My father a real judge. . . . He'll be ahead of all the other lawyers then—"

"Hush, Donnie, you don't understand. He won't be ahead of any one—"

"But you said—"

"He'll only be Police Judge, Donnie."

CHAPTER III

THE tragedy of Cleve Harkness' boyhood had been one of those every-day dramas which as they unfold among commonplace surroundings are lost in the vision of greater happenings. The elder Harkness, despised by other merchants as a dealer in second-hand household goods, led a dingy existence in the room behind his store, and the little boy, who had no mother, slept there when he had to and avoided the place at all other times. Old Saul, who was suspected of being a miser, might have done well by his child had he desired, but he was content to let Polinski, the shoemaker, virtually keep the boy's feet from the frost, while kind-hearted Cresston women patched his little breeches with scraps of their own providing and pitied him because he had no mother of his own to fret his freedom or curtail his wandering.

The Harknesses, father and son, occupied a small niche in the annals of the town until Cleve, finishing High School at an unprecedented age, determined to read law instead of adopting his legitimate occupation of driving the grocer's cart—a post offered and refused the day following his graduation. Naturally enough he became an object of loathing to other boys whose envious parents constantly pointed to him as a model.

The grocer was indignant and put his side of the matter before old Saul when he passed the shop next day. The grocer wanted to know what people were raising boys for,

nowadays. But the second-hand dealer merely looked at him with his red-rimmed eyes that seemed to have been peering too long in dark and musty corners and went on his way with a wry and icy smile. He made no sign of having heard the grocer's complaint, and no one had seen him evince any interest in the boy himself; but that night as they faced each other across their frugal supper table he asked a question or two in his thin, rasping voice that had never warmed to any human intercourse.

"Why didn't you take the work that Smith offered you?"

Cleve's young mind was filled with a bitterness which denied his father the right to question him. His clothes had shamed him as he stood on the school rostrum. Not all the art of Polinski could hide the wretched condition of his boots, and his swiftly-growing body advertised cruelly the makeshift character of the coat that tried to cover it. He had always been afraid of his father, but now he answered with unprecedented insolence.

"Because I wouldn't drive a grocer's cart."

Saul put down his fork and looked at his son with new attention. "And why?" he asked presently. "Are you proud?"

The boy gave way to a fury as violent as it was rare. Fear having left him for a time, he gloried in the chance to repeat his cherished wrongs; to voice the resentment and bitterness that had grown up with him, and to heap reproaches on the father who had never loved him. He thrust his ragged sleeve before the flame of the lamp.

"Proud!" he cried, "of that? . . . " Then his furious eyes took in the details of the wretched old man in his shabby clothes, and he thought of his narrowness and his total lack of love and generosity. "Or of you who have let me live like a beggar? No, I'm not proud—except that some one

has given me a chance to make something of myself." He said a great deal more, childish, immature ravings, incoherent on account of rage and threatening, disgraceful tears. He impressed nobody, not even himself, and presently lapsed into silence, withdrawing his ragged sleeve from the light of the lamp. Saul had listened with a thoughtful, sardonic smile, waiting patiently for him to finish. Only one thing interested him.

"Who is going to help you?"

The boy answered with pride, lifting his head and meeting his father's eyes squarely. "Judge Christy. I'm going to read law with him. I began to-day."

Old Harkness threw back his head and laughed, a laugh as horrible as his red-rimmed eyes, while the boy looked at him astonished. "Christy," he repeated when he could speak. "Roscoe Christy! You have made plans for a fine future. Gad! There'll be a pair of you, poor old Roscoe and a young jackanapes who's ashamed of his father. It's a fine joke, young one, but of course you can't see the point at your age. . . . But you'll laugh like I do when you're thirty. . . . Let me ask you one thing more. How do you expect to live while you're reading law? You'll be too proud to let me keep you, of course."

Whether or not he was too proud, the boy answered this by working in the despised grocer's store after all, and studying at night for a year. But having a mind which possessed some marvelous faculty for absorbing knowledge and turning it into instant advantage, the end of this period found him in a position of petty independence through the copying of papers, bill collecting, and other unpleasant business details, and he was able to divorce himself from sugar and bacon and devote all his time to Blackstone. He lived in a cuddy at the rear of Judge Christy's office, and with

blithe confidence in himself and a dogged determination to win his goal, studied and delved through the countless volumes of the Christy library, until at eighteen he had acquired a formidable and uncanny knowledge that ranked him with, or far beyond, the sons of Cresston's prominent citizens, such as Peter Withrow and Alan Wickersham, who returned each summer from Eastern colleges with little to show for their absence except silver cups and troublesome bills.

Cleve never crossed swords with his father again, though opportunity had not been lacking. A boyish dignity and shame for the other's incredible meanness kept him silent in the face of taunts. Two things gave him control of his own temper; one of them, the fact that he had won his own point, and the other, which came slowly to him as his mind matured, was that his father was by no means ignorant of his progress.

Other matters began to worry him as he grew older. There were even moments when he wished that old Saul would break the ice between them with an insult that he could answer, for he had to admit at last that there had been a reason for the sardonic laughter on the occasion of his post-graduate rebellion. He was beginning to think that he had made a mistake in aligning his fortunes to a tottering cause.

To the expanding schoolboy mind, the Christy name had meant favor from the highest. The Courthouse Square had been named for the Christys, and Cleve could not imagine a greater honor; to him, as to Donnie, years later, that fact spoke of inevitable wealth and power. Now, however, he was wiser.

Beset by an active conscience, he argued his first case with himself as plaintiff. Why should he bury his youth and its opportunities in the grimy, forgotten office of a man

who had never made good? He had worked hard. His own cleverness and application had stuffed his brain with learning and his soul with ambition; there was no chance for either to be heard behind a door that never opened. What did he owe to Roscoe Christy after all? He had paid his way by a thousand minor tasks performed for a man who had no son to take the place of failing eyesight and heavy feet. Yet, at the same time, conscience reminded him of the first visit he had ever paid to the dingy room, which then had seemed a shrine; a wretched schoolboy, holding his battered cap in twiddling fingers, explaining between gasps that he wanted to "study law." He also recalled the man who listened to him with grave courtesy, not smiling or interrupting, promising, when the interview was over, to help him to his desire. He had been given his chance to learn, and the food for his ambition was on the endless shelves that covered the walls to the ceiling. His conscience reminded him of a debt that he miserably admitted, until a girl's smile and an invitation coquettishly offered erased the sentence that would have chained him to an outgrown allegiance.

Wickersham and Frye were the most progressive firm in Cresston. They united with their legal practice a thriving business in real estate and first mortgages, and Cleve's activities as substitute clerk brought him into frequent contact with both partners. Wickersham and Frye were not the sort to overlook anything that tended to their own advantage. They saw in Cleve a youngster of remarkable promise, with a keen mind and a genius for making friends—always with the right people. They began to look him up, and in the process discovered something that brought them together in whispered consultation. The result of this was a very decent offer to polish off Cleve's legal education, and at

the same time pay him a living wage for nominal duties. It turned the boy's head, though it did not entirely turn his heart. While he was hesitating between conscience and desire, Bessie Wickersham smiled and invited him to a Sunday tea, as her father had ordered her to do, and the balance was turned. Cleve bought a new blue serge suit and went to Wickersham and Frye. In a little while he nodded condescendingly when he met Roscoe Christy on the street.

Until that time girls had been a negligible quality in Cleve's life. He had been too poverty-stricken, too interested in his own flaming intelligence, to think of them; the one exception being Antonia Christy, a shy child with too much hair and thin legs, who did not count. Cleve thought of her when he wanted an audience that never failed in appreciation. She was absorbingly interested in what he learned, rather than in him, and this relieved the embarrassments of adolescence. With Antonia he gravely discussed "points," and more than once she brilliantly defeated him, to his chagrin and astonishment. But even at this age he had a masculine distaste for brains in women and refused to credit her with knowledge equal to his own, preferring to accuse her of parroting her father's sayings; a charge gently endured by Antonia, for in all things that did not move her deeply she was sweetly yielding. Absorbed in his dawning future, Cleve failed to realize that she kept pace with him and was his closest companion until that historic day when Bessie smiled.

The Wickersham girl was a dumpy creature with a thick waist and a nervous apprehension about marriage. She would never have wasted a glance on Cleve except by her father's command, but, having smiled once, she found it agreeable, and Cleve's entrée to the inner circle was paved for a little way with Bessie's favor.

She was four years his senior, but he found it easy to fall in love with her, and having once experienced passion he brought to that altar all the enthusiasm, the keen energy, and tireless investigation that characterized his endeavors.

Bessie passed quickly, disappearing in marriage with a young doctor who needed the Wickersham connection. Long after she had faded from Cleve's mind as anything except a rather dowdy, stout matron, she cherished the memory of certain passages between them and wondered if, in case she died first, she should confess to the doctor. She would have been a happy woman if she had known that her smile marked an epoch in Cleve's life.

Old Saul Harkness watched the gliding changes in his son's life with evil eyes that missed nothing. He had delightful moments picturing Cleve's amazement if he knew that, far from displeasing his father, he was being secretly commended. Old Saul thought of himself as a marvel of diplomacy. Why not? The boy was being educated in the best of schools, experience—and without costing a dollar. While men like Withrow and Wickersham were throwing their money away on Eastern colleges, his boy was reaping the advantages at home that should have belonged to their sons. He was waiting for Cleve to reach a certain stage of development before he told him the truth and made him a partner in his own future. He wanted to be sure that the boy had reached a level in life and that he was coldly calculating enough to keep the helm of his little boat square set.

There was still a nominal association between the two, and one evening Cleve stopped in to see his father on his way from a warm, delightful house where his evening had been spent; still thinking of incense and soft cushions and the thousand and one luxuries which made up the life of the

people with whom he was becoming acquainted. With these thoughts before his mind, he astonished his father with an attack of such sudden brutality that the old man, whose soul reveled in his pinch-penny, makeshift household, recoiled before the sweeping condemnation.

"Why should we live in such mire as this? Between us we could manage something better. . . . We're not beggars . . ."

Saul looked rather piteously around the rooms where he had spent the greater portion of his life. In a way his habitation reflected his outlook on life, and for this reason it fulfilled his every need. Now he realized that Cleve's desire to transform the world would begin upon the roof which had sheltered him. But old Harkness was prepared to defend himself from the attack.

"Hah! What!" he snorted, showing his teeth. "You're getting up in the air, young man. What's done all this? When a man's ashamed of the bed that bred him it's a question that wants an answer. Why isn't this house good enough for you?"

Confronted with this, Cleve replied forcibly, not mincing words. "Because it's nothing but a damned hovel, filthy and unsanitary. You can afford a decent house. Why don't you have one?"

Saul sensed danger. He might almost have been seen withdrawing into an impervious if invisible cover of his own. It was nearly the first time in his life that he had been attacked openly on the subject of money, and now he thanked whatever gods he knew that he had been reticent with this blatant youngster, who was ruining his chance to share his father's secret.

"How do you know what I can afford?" he began, raising his voice until his antagonist was silenced. "You've

lost your head. . . . Women have done it. . . . They'll ruin you. I see it coming. . . . Women—at your age. That's what association with that old star-gazer Christy has done for you. . . . You are out of your place—moonstruck. If you want a better house you'll have to support it yourself . . . marry a rich girl."

Cleve blushed. He was still young enough to blush at the mention of marriage, which was like a sacred vision to him. However, the vulgar wrangle decided him, and he broke with his father finally, going to live at Mrs. Miller's boarding-house on Thelma Avenue, and taking with him a suitcase which contained his second suit, a half dozen collars and some worn linen. Mrs. Miller loved his bold blue eyes and the way he admitted that he couldn't pay much at the start. She began at once to superintend his scanty wardrobe and to fortify it in unsuspected places.

However, he was still too unimportant a figure in society for his movements to cause the faintest interest. He might have learned his textbooks backward without exciting the uplift of a penciled eyebrow. Women were beginning to notice his lithe, graceful figure and charming manner, and men knew that his accuracy could be counted on in business matters, but these things were little things to measure importance by. Among the undergraduates who returned to Cresston for the holidays he was gray and ungilded. He needed something to give his rise the momentum that would thrust him into the warm glow of public approval, and running true to the form which had marked his way this far, it came to him.

When America declared war it brought the same conditions to Cresston which came to a thousand small towns. Life was topsy-turvy in a day. The social system was thrown into the scrap heap, sifted and readjusted. A man's

importance was measured by his height and weight, the clearness of his eye. Over night the blacksmith became more important to a hysterical public than the banker over fifty. Democracy entered the back door and declared the cobbler equal to the king—if he could carry equipment better.

Out of this confusion of tradition Cleve Harkness issued like the hero of a play. While other men scrambled for patronage and appointments and rubbed up half-forgotten knowledge or failed ignominiously, Cleve, without exerting himself in the least, was among the first to pass for a commission, and, having received it, returned for the briefest of visits to his home town to find himself a hero.

For the first time women really discovered him, and it must be admitted that in his uniform he was worth looking at. The town turned out to give him praise, and though there was a smart contingent of Cresston men who served, it was generally of Cleve Harkness that people thought when they mentioned the town's quota.

It may have been his loneliness. It was noticed that there was no service star in the window of his father's second-hand store, and, while they only despised old Saul the more for this omission, they did not enforce the duty upon him. Wickersham and Frye put two stars in their window instead—one for Cleve and one for Alan, who was a doughboy in spite of Yale.

Cleve came back after two years. Most of this time had been spent in training camps, but he got to France in time to bring back a few stories that added brilliantly to the town's history. Of all the men who returned he was most welcomed by the public, who adopted him and made him their own. His old place with Wickersham and Frye was open to him, but he could not retreat from the dignity of

his commission to the position of handy man in a busy office; besides he felt himself the equal, if not the superior, of men whose territory was a yard or two of Turkey carpet. He had no money, or next to none, or he would have made the start alone. Failing this, he looked about for some one whose limitations fitted to his own qualifications.

He found the man he sought in Peter Withrow. He had known Peter all of his life, of course, but when Polinski was mending Cleve's broken shoes for nothing, Peter was riding his blooded pony and having his lessons from an imported governess, so that their ways seldom touched. After the habit of childhood they had envied each other; Cleve had longed for the rich boy's comfort, and Peter wanted, above all things, the freedom and simplicity of the gutter. But it had never gone further than that.

As young men, they were further apart than ever because of the difference in their natures; Peter caring for none of the friends who would have chosen him, and Cleve assiduously making friends everywhere. However, the war changed all this.

Peter did not go. His near-sighted eyes left him stranded at home, and nobody knew how he felt about it, for in the passionate excitement of new-found brotherhood with the brawny saviors of the country, he was forgotten. He gave money, since they would not let him give himself, and when it was all over and the papers were filled with the dull aftermath of political discussion, he invited Cleve Harkness to take a long ride with him one afternoon. When they returned the new firm had been named and capitalized.

Wickersham and Frye felt rather foolish when they thought of the second service star, and in the privacy of his dark and dusty shop old Saul chuckled and rubbed his

palms. He could see his son climbing upward upon the bruised hands of those who had lifted him.

Cleve wakened to the fact that, having a place of his own, he could follow his own ideas and not another man's. He parted from his firm with regret but no sentiment. He did not suspect their motives, because he thought only of his own. Life and the joy of living were pressing hard upon his youth; his clear brain was slightly befogged as his body was wearied with too much of what had always been denied. He had never known the cloying sweetness of feminine sympathy en masse, though he had been familiar with pity, and he became swiftly intoxicated with the perfumes of the inner circle, which had until now been unknown to him. Through all this one side of his nature remained impervious to the attack of lethargy. He who had learned to earn money with difficulty, could not learn to spend with ease. Again he scored with fathers who wanted an example to hold before their extravagant sons. He changed his method of living to comfort, but that was all. He was like a skater upon a vast ice stretch, afraid to strike out. His changed circumstances put him in contact with the undergraduates, who by this time had blossomed into professional men. He formed friendships with men like young Wickersham, who had never seriously noticed him before, and with other youths less gilded, but who had their place in the events of the town. For a queer reason known only to himself, Peter Withrow, the most difficult person to know in Cresston, had chosen to respond to Cleve's charm, and every one else was quick to follow his example.

When their names appeared together in fat gold script upon an extravagant set of windows in the Sheridan Building, admiring onlookers spoke of "young blood," and pre-

dicted a startling rise in the professional values of the town.

The war had made tremendous changes, but none more significant than this. To-day was the young man's day, as yesterday was his father's!

CHAPTER IV

THE yellow honeysuckle at the south side of the house had been watered late in the afternoon and its damp, heavy perfume mingled with the lighter essences hidden in the delicate garments and soft hair of the women on the veranda of the Dupagny house in Armitage Street. Rose loved the homely vine that gave itself so freely, and this was strange, for with the secret fire beneath her languid beauty she herself was like an expensive orchid.

She was disdainful of contrast and loved to surround herself with beautiful women. All her guests were charming, except Ethel Plumey, who sat on the top step with her face lifted, hoping that the moonlight made her eyes look romantic. The Plumey girl bored every one except Rose Dupagny, who pitied her and tried to help her, not knowing that such interest seldom wins gratitude. To-night she listened to the flutter of conversation around her and was filled with a longing and envy that could only be assuaged by the discovery of intrigue.

It was one of the nights when Rose's veranda seemed to have captured all the radiance of the town. Most of the men were congregated in Laurence Dupagny's den where he kept a very good brand of Scotch, and the pretty maid who constantly replenished the cracked ice failed to hear anything more exciting than post mortem golf conflicts and desultory electoral predictions, but on the veranda it was different. Enough men remained to make a showing among

the pretty shoulders and slim ankles that emerged from deep wicker porch chairs, and husbands who made bores of themselves were not missed in the white moonlight.

Cleve Harkness, arriving a little late, found a place rather cleverly saved for him beside his hostess. As he slipped into it, guided by a slight pressure of her hand, he was chagrined to find himself with nothing to say. Rose Dupagny always bewildered and confused him, though this condition was gradually passing from their meetings, which had become frequent of late.

Before his war experience, Cleve had known her only as a startling person who sometimes floated across the dull orbit of his beauty-starved existence. In those days he was merely a precocious youngster grasping at knowledge where he could find it; trying to overcome the handicapping parentage of old Saul Harkness, the second-hand dealer, by the fiercely achieved victories in the petty law cases that came his way. But khaki and a medal or two had proven a miraculous bridge which spanned no greater chasm than one which brought him to the chair beside Rose Dupagny.

Under cover of the darkness she smiled, noting the unconscious vibration of his body as the swaying chair brought her nearer to him. She could see his face, dimly lighted with the eagerness that was so charming, turned to her as to the sun. She knew that her nearness embarrassed him and this pleased and amused her, for she loved the conquest of youth and the thrill of its enthusiasm. Protected by a ripple of laughter, she said softly, "I was afraid you would not come."

Miss Plumey filled an empty moment with her gurgling laughter. "Pappa told the oddest story at dinner to-night," she explained when her mirth decreased. "I wonder if you've heard it? It's about the election. The Democrats

have planned such a funny thing to do to somebody. Pappa says the whole town will be laughing to-morrow. . . ."

Into the bored silence that followed, the lazy voice of Alan Wickersham drawled, "You're speaking of poor old Christy. . . . There's nothing very secret about that, and if there's a joke, I can't see the humor of it. The world is full of lawyers who should be selling coal, and if Christy has stuck to a losing game all his life why should he be laughed at more than another? Nobody knows whether he'd be a success at his profession. He never had a chance to show it."

Annoyed at the failure of her small sensation, Miss Plumey began to laugh again to cover her chagrin. "But it's so absurd," she persisted, "because his father was a Supreme Court Judge, he's tried to live up to it and make his family live up to it, too. They're dreadfully poor, you know, and it's so ridiculous, that pompous old man calling himself Judge when he isn't really anything. Pappa says they nicknamed him that when he was about twenty, and ever since he has been trying to get himself elected to an office, from the senate down. The men who run the elections thought they would give him a right to his title at last, and he'll really be a judge—police judge. It was awfully clever of some one to think of it."

"You read with him, didn't you, Harkness?" Alan Wickersham asked.

"Yes . . . he has a tremendous library; one of the best in the State. I read with him."

Ethel Plumey broke in again. "They say he accepted the nomination as if he'd been asked to run for Congress."

In the shadow of the overlapping elms, invisible persons not eligible to the Dupagny veranda, strolled toward the Square, where the blazing electric signs of vulgar, amusing

picture theaters cajoled them from the soft, warm night. Their voices, murmurous, admonishing, and critical, rose and fell; children whimpered and laughed. Out of the ruck of unimportant nobodies, a man, walking slowly, turned in at the Dupagny steps and before he reached the group on the veranda they recognized Peter Withrow.

Rose allowed herself the luxury of a smile that embraced her contempt for Laurence Dupagny's undisguised eagerness to welcome a man whose money tempted him. Not that she disdained money herself, for as she put her cool slim fingers into Peter's, she wondered anxiously if he would consent to bolster one of Dupagny's shaky enterprises with some of his idle thousands.

In the slight stir of this arrival the soft merriment subsided. People were a little afraid of Peter Withrow, he had an uncertain, caustic trick of speech that sometimes bit deep beneath vanity. Ease and abandon fled at his approach and Miss Plumey curled herself against the protection of somebody's knees.

But Peter himself knew nothing of this. It was a summer night and he was lonely. He did not know Rose Dupagny very well, but her enigmatic smile promised a deeper understanding than he found in other women.

"We're talking about old Christy's library," explained young Wickersham. "Harkness says it's the finest in the state."

"He should know," responded Peter, dryly.

Cleve moved restlessly. "Complete, as far as it goes, but not up to date," he said. "Hundreds of the books are useless."

"Then if he has read them all, he should make a perfectly splendid police judge," giggled Miss Plumey, brightly. "Have you heard, Mr. Withrow? He's to be a really,

truly judge at last. You men must all vote for him. He must think the whole town is dying for him to win. That's part of the joke."

Peter was silent; then he said, "I've heard about it—yes. It's a damned shame. I wish I knew the man who started it——"

Laurence Dupagny interfered. . . . "Well, well," he said in his smooth voice, "who cares for politics in this weather. . . ." He drew the last guest into the masculine shelter of the den, and the veranda, safe from Peter, relaxed.

"What a boor," gasped Miss Plumey. "Who would think he was a Harvard man?"

People paired off. From the secluded chairs came the gurgle of débutantes and the seasoned inflection of married flirts. The Wickersham youth found himself face to face with Ethel Plumey, and in an effort to escape declared that he must go. There was a ripple of cruel amusement when she claimed this intention as well.

When they were gone Rose said gayly to Cleve Harkness, who remained at her side, "It will be all over town tomorrow that Peter Withrow swore in the presence of ladies. Why doesn't he behave and become a respectable member of society?"

Cleve's slight restraint had vanished long ago and he was able to summon a mood that met her own. Rose Dupagny was more charming than he imagined a woman could be, and he was dazzled by the challenge he sometimes glimpsed in her eyes. Rose wondered what was beneath the smooth exterior of this new young man who had suddenly become a person of importance in their midst. She admitted his good looks, but many men were good looking without interesting her. She had always been careful to hold herself in the feminine rôle while secretly smiling over

the fatuity of her admirers who could not see that she defended herself with the weapon of flattery. It was so easy to win men that she pitied Cleve, thrust without preparation upon the spears of a hundred attractive women. She was astonished to find pity an element in her interest which centered about him. She felt the years that divided them. They were not many, but she was irrevocably the elder. She wanted to advise him, to warn him of what she knew so well, and to tell him those things of which she thought him to be ignorant. Tenderness was a new and dangerous sensation for her. She remembered distinctly all the stories she had heard of his childhood spent here in Cresston where his value had just been discovered. His willingness to learn from her was an added novelty and charm in their relationship; all the men she knew believed so thoroughly in themselves and resented help from a woman so warmly. . . . Even her husband who had been wrong enough times to shatter the most rockbound egotism, would accept nothing from her. . . .

There was an excitement in this incipient friendship which no other had held for her. She found the entire formula reversed and all calculated moves made valueless by his attitude of simple and frank admiration. The flattery of his complete submission left her no room to flatter him. She was almost embarrassed by his respect. But their conversation was completely innocuous and might have been overheard by the world without interest. During the hour which both remembered for days they spoke of the Country Club which Cleve had just joined and of the automobile he had recently ordered.

"Peter chose it," he admitted, with an utter ingenuousness that acknowledged poverty without shame. "I know nothing about them, you see, and he's owned a half a dozen."

He hesitated, plainly making up his mind for a bold question. "I wonder if you'd do a big thing for me, Mrs. Dupagny?"

She murmured assent, her quick mind leaping to a dozen possibilities. "I want you to try it out with me when it comes," he hesitated. "It's only a very small one."

"The automobile!" she gasped, realizing where her thoughts had led her. Then she laughed indulgently. "What a child you are! I thought you were about to ask for the moon. Of course I will. Why not?"

While they were laughing over this Dupagny and Peter came from the house. Presently the two young men, the last of a lazy procession, went down the street together. Dupagny leaned over the high back of Rose's chair. His face was close enough to feel the warmth of her hair and the coolness of her cheek. All his habitual ill humor had vanished and there was wistful appeal in the way he tried to draw a response from her.

"I believe I'll get Withrow in on that deal yet," he said, bidding for her favor. "He's discovered that I keep the right brand of Scotch and his respect for my judgment has multiplied. If I can handle his money for awhile, you won't have to worry over dressmaker's bills in the future. I will make every dollar earn three."

Still her veiled eyes remained away from him. He could not tell if she heard. He cupped her face in his hands with a sort of mild passion and forced her lips upward to his. "Rose! Do you care at all—for me? For our life together? I know it's been rotten at times, but everything is for you. Nothing else counts—"

"Yes, dear, yes," she soothed, like one who repeats an old story. She was not thinking of him.

CHAPTER V

ANTONIA loved her room, but it was beautiful to no eyes but her own. It was narrow gabled and low roofed and the floor sighed with every footstep as though other feet, long dead, had returned to walk there. In the spring the tops of fruit trees reached the dormer windows and touched them with feathery bloom so that there was a riot of color and perfume, and the old walnut pieces, full of gentle curves and polishes, had the air of age benevolently watching the frolics of youth. Antonia loved her room most in spring.

When Mrs. Christy came there it always left her a little tearful. She would never sit in the brown rocker with the curved back, for she knew its history and dreaded a fall at her age. Her idea of a young girl's room was something in bird's-eye maple with swiss curtains and a good Brussels rug. Years ago when Antonia was a baby, and they rocked summer dusks away she had furnished such a room in her fancy, but it had never come to anything. Antonia herself had grown far away from this ideal and not even her mother could modify her to such a background.

It pained Mrs. Christy most to watch Antonia before her dresser brushing her hair. She could never understand why this monstrosity, so incongruous to slender youth, had found its way there and was cherished. But to Antonia it was a dear possession. She had discovered the huge piece of furniture and rescued it from the ignominy of a jam

closet and to her it had beauty. The dim mirror gave back a ghostly reflection and the drawer handles, carved of solid, polished wood were shaped like the knuckles of a closed hand so that in touching one had the sensation of clasping cold and unresponsive fingers. To one less vital this might have been depressing, but Antonia thought of her bureau merely in terms of affection and as a receptacle strong and secure for the safeguarding of her humble treasures.

Her dreams were curious phantasies at this time, chaotic and touched with the fragrance of young girlhood. She must have possessed a small share of her mother's whimsical imagination, for these idle fancies were woven with quaint aircastles built from the traditions of her family's glory. There were times when the Christy pride seemed to Antonia a false and unworthy idol, but she could not admit this disloyalty, even to herself, without a pang. She was bred to reverence the attitude of fifty years ago, but facing the inconsistencies of the present she could not always believe in it. Youth and a certain strain of common sense inherited from some unromantic progenitor, demanded more than she was getting out of life, or at least an accounting from the treasured traditions which were like a cross upon her young shoulders.

On the day of the city election Mrs. Christy, approaching the gabled room in a state of mind divided between faint resentment and respect, discovered Antonia sitting by the open window, where the green leaves of the plum tree tops formed a screen from the sun, with a ponderous tome upon her knees. The overflow of the Christy library was packed away in the attic and for years she had been reading these books one after another without sequence, absorbing in this way a vast amount of knowledge and miscellaneous, star-

tling data. Her mother looked fretted when she saw the musty pages of the book. She disapproved of such reading and was of the fixed opinion that law books contained much information highly improper for the minds of young girls; the older the volume the more certain was she that this was the case. But she seldom voiced these opinions. Unconsciously she and Antonia had exchanged places years before and mingled with her disapproval was a sensation of awe. The fact that Antonia could interpret those obscure legal phrases connected with the transfer of property, gave her an unmeasured superiority which her mother recognized and respected.

The subject of the election had been seldom referred to in the family, though Mrs. Christy innocently betrayed its paramount importance in her mind by assuming toward the judge a manner usually reserved for the sickroom. She presented an unbending attitude of cheerful optimism toward the future, mildly resenting Antonia's fierce denunciation of the town and its people who were trying to make a mockery of her father. For Antonia had seen through the mean and sorry jest, and at length in sick pity she desisted from trying to make her mother see also what was so plain to her.

"Your father is one of the smartest men Cresston ever produced," declared Mrs. Christy with vehemence. "He reads Latin and Greek as easily as he does the Cresston *Times*,—you've seen him do it. He's been unappreciated in this town. I sometimes think a family can live too long in one place. Neither the Christys nor the Saltwells are what they once were, but nobody can say what this election may lead to. When I saw that your father was bound to accept it, I argued it out with him. If it wasn't necessary to have police judges we wouldn't have them, would we? And if

it's a necessary office, and your father fills it better than any other man has done, it's a step in the right direction, isn't it?"

"And poor father is over fifty," Antonia said, with the pity of youth. "Oh, mother, how simple and sweet you are, —or are you simple, I wonder? Aren't you deeper than the rest of us who storm and rage at Fate?"

"I've always found resentment didn't pay," Mrs. Christy returned, with the air of a philosopher. "If your father had resented the way Cresston people have treated him, he wouldn't have this chance to heap coals of fire upon their heads."

It was impossible to combat Mrs. Christy when she was determined to be pleased and Antonia was far from this wish. She met her mother's look of innocent triumph with a smile. She was reserving herself for a struggle that must come later, and Mrs. Christy's ebullitions aroused in her nothing more than a spirit of sadness, a foreboding of the time when she must put her strength against the love that bound her wings.

Mrs. Christy sat down recklessly without noticing that her choice had fallen upon the dangerous brown rocker. "Well, child," she said with a brisk air of completion, "in a few hours now we shall know everything. I've made a blackberry pie. I hope nothing will happen to irritate your father. This means far more to him than you can imagine."

"What can it mean," said Antonia, slowly, "except that all these years he has been—mistaken? What a frightening thought that is! To go through life—mistaken, because of empty prejudices; following little paths opened by dead and gone people, when all the time one might be building wide highways for oneself."

Mrs. Christy was scandalized; "Little paths!" she echoed indignantly. "Are you speaking of your Grandfather Lemuel Christy's career in that disrespectful way? Upon my word, Antonia, you have the oddest ideas for a young girl! I suppose you would be pleased if your father kept a harness shop." She breathed deeply.

"I should," Antonia answered calmly, "if he made good harness."

"That is the point exactly," cried her mother instantly. "Your father, with Lemuel Christy's example before him, will mete out justice, even if it is to the lowest classes,—people who get themselves arrested in low brawls. Surely, Antonia, justice is as necessary to that class as to those higher up. Your father will show Cresston what it means to be a Christy, even if the office they offer him isn't all it should be."

Antonia said nothing. She was ashamed. Sometimes her mother, with her simple childish reasoning, had the power to humiliate her, though Mrs. Christy never dreamed of her success. But after a moment Antonia discovered that she was not convinced. She closed the book upon her knees, knowing that the time had come for the destruction of the peace between them. "Mother," she said, "you and father have not been fair to us,—to Donnie and me. Why do you forget us when you insist upon justice? Haven't we the right to a home where things are paid for? Why does father think that he can live on credit all his life—credit furnished by a dead man's name, and then pride himself on distributing justice to people who have only been guilty of trivial wrongs,—like wife-beating!"

"Antonia!" Mrs. Christy was pale. This sounded like blasphemy. "What are you saying? You have read those

dreadful books until it has made you unmaidenly. Your father—you have no respect for him—you dishonor him with such words. How do you know—how can you know —what has brought him to this? Your poor father—you never loved him as a daughter should—" She began to weep, with her worn hands before her face.

"Perhaps not as a daughter," cried Antonia passionately, "but as a son! Oh, mother, you cannot know how I have longed to help! If I were his son he would let me help—he would have the pride in me that he has lost in himself. I want to bring our family back to what it was. I want to make them give him respect, if not honors. The sorry jest they played should be turned upon them. Love him! I love him enough to give my life to the work of saving our name from ignominious failure—"

She stopped with a despairing gesture, pressing her hands against her breast. Her mother did not understand. Antonia had been telling her cherished thoughts to incomprehension.

But neither did Antonia understand! The older woman looked at her sadly. The intolerance of youth and its blindness! If Mrs. Christy had put her thought in words she might have said that youth and beauty were not meant for sacrifice like this, nor would life let it happen. She smiled wistfully, recalling the facts that Antonia passed over without consideration, but a delicate shame and incoherence prevented such allusion,—that, and the certainty that so young a girl could not understand. Instead she said primly:

"Some day you will be married with a home of your own, and then you will understand what is due the head of a family. I must say, Antonia, there are times when you seem

very selfish. You are actually planning to trouble your father at the very moment when his mind is harassed by his new office. He needs all his strength and calm to meet these conditions."

When she was alone once more Antonia did not return to her book. She sat quietly for a while with her smooth chin resting on the little hollow of her neck. Presently she went over to the bureau with the handles like closed knuckles. She sat on the floor and drew out one of the lower drawers, and from the bottom of this unearthed a white cardboard box tied with a ribbon.

She turned the contents over in her hand bit by bit. There was nothing there but ordinary keepsakes; powdery dried flowers, a button from a soldier's uniform, and a dance program covered with scribbled names on the back of which was written—"I'd rather dance with you," in a boyish scrawl. The last thing she looked at was a shallow package of letters. All these small mementos came from Cleve Harkness.

They had not met since the night when Donnie's fence corner had been usurped. Cresston was a small city, but its environs embraced widely separated social groups. Cleve, son of the second hand furniture dealer, was a person far removed from Antonia's orbit and only chance could bring them together. In the daily record of the town's social maneuvers she read his name as guest at this dinner or that dance; he belonged to the Golf Club; he was everywhere that pretty women congregated; he had suddenly become a person of gay importance. She knew that he had moved from Mrs. Miller's boarding house on Thelma Avenue where he had lived so long, and this fact alone seemed to separate them eternally. . . .

She was beginning to think of him as she had when he was in France,—a distant personality, not touching upon her own life except through shadowy memories. But now something her mother had said wakened her heart for a moment to a poignant thrill which left her saddened and thoughtful as it disappeared.

CHAPTER VI

THE fireplace in the middle room of the Christy house was all that remained of the original building, which had been a pretentious mansion in the days when houses were really houses. Fire having laid its perishable structure in ashes, another house, humble and mean in comparison, had taken its place, apologizing from year to year with the promise of better things, but gradually settling itself around what had been the heart of the great house,—a heart which lived on in spite of ignominy.

In summer time the fireplace was a gaunt and blackened cavern which in years past Mrs. Christy tried to brighten with green branches and poinsettias made of red crinkled paper. This habit, however, had been abandoned and now there was nothing to break the cold monotony of the broad granite slabs, cut from the quarry which once belonged to the family, and which furnished Cresston with half its foundations. The iron crane still hung in the chimney, but the fire ovens where bread had been baked and the spit that could turn a quarter of beef as easily as a pullet, were banished to the attic. Mrs. Christy looked at them now and then, and reflected sadly on the waste and profligacy of those days.

But in winter the fireplace could be magnificent. While the farm remained and wood was plentiful it was possible to pile as many logs as three men could carry upon the tremendous firedogs, whose sooty smirk remained changeless

under incalculable burdens. But the memory of even those days was beginning to grow dim. In the narrowing of life, even had fuel been at hand, it would have seemed almost criminal to feed the voracious maw of that black grave with hickory and oak . . . but there were times when Mrs. Christy was unable to pay the gas bill and then the orchard and crumbling fences would be surreptitiously robbed and a small fire, like the dying flicker of an incredibly great eye, would live for a little while upon the altar that had known past greatness.

On the night of the election, though it was summer time, such a fire burned there, far back between the dogs who disdained to admit its existence. Earlier in the evening Roscoe Christy sawed a dead limb from an apple tree and broke it to pieces in his hands. He lighted the fire in silence and when night came sat before it in the deep chair that had been his grandfather's. At irregular intervals he would lift his somber glance to the great silver watch which hung on a deep bedded hook just above his head. As he marked the passage of time, the melancholy of his passive waiting settled into such gloom that at last he looked no more.

The watch had always hung there against the chimney. It was as large and thick as a man's doubled hands, and it had been manufactured in the days when a watch meant something beside idle frippery. In defiance of modern clockmaker's skill it continued to mark time through the years when lesser timepieces came into the family life, tarried for a little while, and went the way of broken springs and worn out mechanism. The births and deaths that centered around the middle room had been marked by the watch . . . its inexorable hands had been watched in anguish as they measured the moments when Roscoe Christy's first child lay

dying on its mother's knees . . . the watch never lied. It had kept strange vigils, and now that the family had been humbled, it pointed serenely to the hour of their fallen pride.

Antonia and her mother sat sewing beneath the hard radiance of the gas lamp which increased the heat of the room already made uncomfortable by the small fire. The untrimmed trees shut away what breeze might have penetrated the open window, but an occasional insect that had wandered from the orgy around the arc light on the corner, beat its life out against the wire screen with a dull, booming sound. Neither of them dreamed of objecting to the unseasonable fire, for they understood why it had been built and bore their discomfort without complaint. In the past when an honor had been paid the Christys there had always been great bonfires and barbecues made by the childish, delighted slaves, and friends had come from distances to celebrate the triumph. But now the handful of rotten apple boughs was all the last Christy could afford to make the sorry honor paid him at the end of his submerged years.

"Some one is coming," said Mrs. Christy, in an excited whisper.

The gate had closed with a clash of rusty hinges and footsteps came along the flagged walk and onto the echoing veranda. A hand touched the knocker. Mrs. Christy arose in a flutter. "It must be a caller. Dear me, Antonia, you have on that old pink waist." Her eyes probed into her daughter's soul. "Who do you suppose it can be? If it is some one to see you . . . this room is stifling,—you will have to sit on the porch."

Antonia looked pleadingly at her mother. It was a fiction of Mrs. Christy's that her daughter discouraged eager young men who would otherwise have overwhelmed her

with attentions; both knew that this visitor was there for another purpose, but Mrs. Christy refused to heed the mute entreaty of Antonia's eyes. "I hope your father will be pleasant," she whispered.

The judge got heavily on his feet as the knocker sounded hollowly for the second time. "I will answer the bell," he said, and went out of the room, leaving the two women staring helplessly at each other. They could not remember when he had done such a thing before, and a sense of misgiving mingled with their anticipation. Listening intently, they heard the greeting of men's voices; the brief monologue of the visitor explaining the purpose of his coming and the deeper rumble of the judge's invitation to enter.

"Peter Withrow,—and his father!" whispered Mrs. Christy hurriedly. As the three appeared on the threshold her tragic astonishment changed to the most flattering welcome. "Why, Colonel, what a surprise," she exclaimed, "and Peter, too." At the same moment she deftly cleared a chair of its impediments—widths of a made over skirt—and thrust the sewing basket out of sight. She beamed upon the Colonel and he returned her greeting with equal cordiality. He had been a great beau of the Saltwell girls in days gone by, and for simple souls like his there are no intervening years.

Peter remained standing in the doorway while the older people spoke together. His eyes were fixed upon Antonia who blushed faintly and smiled in answer to his smile. They exchanged a tolerant glance which found excuses for Mrs. Christy's revived coquetry and the pomposity of the two old men who pretended to treat each other with formality.

When the Colonel accepted the chair with magnificent courtesy he said, "We stopped in to tell you the election

news, judge. Naturally, it was a complete victory for the Democratic party. . . . The whole ticket elected without a flaw—straight down."

Roscoe Christy was standing beside his chair and suddenly his knees seemed to collapse. . . . He sat down heavily. . . . "Straight—down," he repeated.

Peter spoke from the background. . . . "Father should have said 'straight through'. . . . Of course you went over easily, judge. There was practically no opposition."

Mrs. Christy began to fan herself nervously. "Dear me," she said in a light, conversational tone, "it is warm for so early in summer. Why you gentlemen should choose such a time for excitement over elections, is beyond me."

But no one was listening. Antonia dropped her work and looked anxiously at her father who had risen and begun slowly to pace the floor. . . . As if he were alone, the judge began to speak in an angry monotonous voice that shut the others away like a wall. . . . "They've elected me—me—to their petty office,—to hold court over loafers and prostitutes . . . me! A Christy sits upon the lowest rung of the ladder with his feet in the street mud . . . and I have lived among them for fifty years! This town . . . part of it starving in poverty and the other half reveling in infamy . . . living on borrowed money, stealing when it has to pay . . . has done this to me. . . ."

Antonia's eyes filled with tears. She went to his side and touched his arm. . . . The moment seemed to bridge the unspoken antagonism that existed between them. "But you can refuse. . . ."

He surveyed her impersonally; she might have been a stranger who ventured to interrupt his mood; then with a sudden return to normality he resumed his seat and thanked the Colonel briefly for bringing the news.

"Cresston needs cleaning up," he said, without a trace of his previous emotion. "It's no longer a fit place to raise our children in. . . . I'll tell you, Jasper, there is a place in Horton Street that should be closed in the interests of the public. A pool hall. A low place where any one who has a dime is welcome. There is a crowd around the door day and night. Such a thing would not have been allowed in our day, and if I'm to be police judge, I warn you now that offenders will not find it easy going in my jurisdiction. . . ." One unacquainted with him might have suspected joviality.

The Colonel was embarrassed. He could not so readily forget the shaken voice which preceded this speech, and it hurt him to see Antonia slighted. He sent her a caressing glance and one of entreaty to his son.

"I'll try to be good," Peter promised, coming to his father's aid, "but if you catch me napping, sir, remember that I have just set up housekeeping."

"With young Harkness. Yes. I trust your young firm has already put off its swaddling clothes." With old-fashioned courtesy he placed the conversation on an impersonal basis and soon the three elder persons were speaking of old times and old days that excluded Antonia and Peter, and left them free to slip away to the hushed darkness of the veranda steps. Peter, pretending to look at the low moon, saw its aura above his companion's smooth hair.

"How kind you are," said Antonia, lifting grateful eyes, "and how cruel the rest of the world is! You saw—how hurt he was."

There was a faint deepening in Peter's gray eyes as he returned her look. "The world is not cruel," he answered thoughtfully. "It is only a small boy who laughs when an-

other is in pain. You must laugh, too, and presently you will forget about the pain."

She shook her head. "No one has ever laughed at you."

"Haven't they?" He made her look at him. "Haven't you heard them say that I am a fool,—and worse? Oh, yes, you have. I see it in your eyes. Sometimes, when I drink too much—or when they think I do, they laugh at me because I don't hide away in some safe retreat until it is over, concealing my weakness from them. They laugh, Antonia."

She could not deny this. "But why—why—should you do this, Peter? It is when people make mistakes blindly that it is pitiful. But you are not blind."

"Nor are you. Why do you insist on reading law when you could be such a delightful woman?"

This was old ground and they loved to fight over every inch of it. Peter leaned against a worm eaten pillar and prepared for argument. Antonia was a quick antagonist and he found himself losing the thread of their talk when the moonlight touched her face.

"You see, Antonia," he said, "the most ludicrous thing in the world is failure, and the most tragic. You can afford to look like a harlequin if you make it pay, but no clown ever amused his audience as much as the tragedian who muffs his lines."

"Why are you so sure that I should fail? Oh, Peter, don't be like the others."

He looked at her lazily. "My dear girl, as long as the world moves and men breathe, they are going to forget how well a girl knows Greek if she has long eyelashes."

She answered him with such deep seriousness that he laughed, admitting tacitly that he did not mean all he said.

Antonia sighed with relief. "If you were really in earnest, Peter—"

"Would you care?"

"It would hurt. You are the only person I can talk to,—about myself, I mean. It would mean losing you."

When he spoke there was a subtle change in his tone. "You will not lose me, Antonia. I shall always be a safe, reliable audience. Do you want to tell me something to-night?"

His jesting mood was gone, as was the indefinable quality which gave her a breathless, uncertain sensation of standing too near a hidden explosive. He was once more the quiet, tractable Peter who always sympathized. She reveled in that rare treat for a woman,—a man who listens without making love or becoming bored by her confidence.

"I want to—work," she said in a suppressed voice. "It is the only way, Peter . . . and father will not let me work with him,—not even copy old papers so that I might learn a little. I shall have to go elsewhere. I have read and studied all I can alone. . . . I have thought it all out. There must be firms who would let me typewrite for them while I read. I would work so hard. . . ." She stopped abruptly; the same thought occurred to both.

"Cleve Harkness found it easy enough," Peter said dryly. "He will be a successful man and he has worked every inch of the way."

"Father was the first to help him," mused Antonia with a trace of bitterness,—though not for Cleve. "Why should he be willing to give a stranger and deny me,—because I am a woman?"

"That is why," he answered gently, "because you are a woman. Your father is a slave to tradition and so are mil-

lions of other people. The world would be reorganized in a day if it wasn't for this power that is stronger than all of us. It's the influence of our ancestors on the subconscious mind. He cannot accept you as a lawyer because there is a horde of masculine Christys in the Beyond who clamor against it."

After a pause she said quietly, "Will you let me work for you, Peter?"

"Good Lord!" He sat erect. She could see the flush that stole over his face. "Work for me? What made you think of such a thing—"

"Because I must begin somewhere, and—and—I know you are not afraid of ancestors."

They both burst out laughing at that. Peter was known to be the black sheep of the Withrow family. For years it had been prophesied that when the judgment day arrived the family lots would be found to be a place of chaos with Withrows who had turned in their graves because of him.

"I'll think it over," he replied, doubting her earnestness, "but remember, the Withrows are a gentler clan than the Christys."

"Hush," whispered Antonia, without a smile. The house door was opening and they heard the others saying good night.

CHAPTER VII

THE Sheridan Building where Peter Withrow and Cleve Harkness had their offices was one of the new structures to which Cresston pointed with pride. There had been a great deal of building in the last six years, but nothing which approached the Sheridan in size or magnificence. There was, if the truth be spoken, rather too much of space and elegance to justify the demands of its clientele, and the stockholders made wry faces when they looked over the rental list. The Sheridan was one of Laurence Dupagny's enterprises, and as usual he could not endure success. Building was a popular investment when the Sheridan was promoted, and, finding the going easy, Dupagny promptly doubled his original plans and an office building out of all proportion to the population was the result.

Cresston staggered under the load of emulation. The Square threw off the lethargy of its rotting timbers and by the time Dupagny's mammoth enterprise was completed there were rivals in the field which drew from its legitimate supply of professional men.

The war finished what overbuilding began. During two or three lean years the tall white structure on the northeast corner of Christy Square stood as a reproachful monument to the shortsightedness of its promoters. Men who had money tied up in those empty, echoing walls thought sorrowfully of a dozen better war investments, and Laurence Dupagny found himself an unpopular person where once he had been a prophet.

But this period passed in Cresston as elsewhere. Suddenly it was all over and the returning began. The places of those who did not come back were washed with the tides of forgetfulness and in a little while all the phases of life were functioning as if the interlude had never been.

But Cresston was still overbuilt. The arrears of three years of inanition had to be met somehow and the manager of the Sheridan met it in a unique way. He turned the surplus space, for which Laurence Dupagny's over vivid imagination was responsible, into living quarters for his bachelor tenants. The new idea was adopted with enthusiasm and in six months the innovation was a success. It became the smartest thing possible to keep apartments at the Sheridan, and at almost any hour of the day a line of motors was parked before the wide entrance on Hewlett Avenue. The Country Club set rather adopted it as their own, and the operators at the two stations struck up one of those odd wire friendships for which the telephone is responsible. They knew everybody's business and were dangerously familiar with all the love affairs of the moment. The town had its quota of gossips who found material to their taste in the peculiar management of the apartment-office building; but, so far, a certain code of loyalty preserved the secrets—if there were any—of the faction whose interests centered around this place.

It was not easy to meet the requirements of the lease, only half of which appeared on paper, but Cleve Harkness was admitted without question. His rooms, a very charming suite, were directly behind the front offices shared by Peter Withrow and himself, and the two windows of his sitting room faced on Hewlett Avenue. They were desirable rooms and he might not have possessed them so easily but for a whim of Peter's.

For a time Peter had entertained the idea of living in them himself, and the lease was made out in his name, but for some reason the project was abandoned and Cleve fell heir to the unused apartment. Peter continued to live in the tall old Withrow house on Armitage Street. He offered the whimsical explanation that old Daniel, the colored house servant, had refused to move with him, and as Daniel had been accustomed to undressing him since childhood and owned a talent for removing boots which belonged to no other valet, Peter must perforce remain where Daniel was at hand.

Cleve could never have afforded such luxury if the way had not been smoothed for him. He admitted this with his usual boyish frankness when he thanked his partner for the loan—that was his own word—of the gray and gold rooms. For a time he mentioned the rooms and the roadster every day; the smart little car was another pleasure which Peter's friendship made possible—but after a few weeks he entered upon these things as though they were his by right and Peter, for one, was glad to hear the last of it. The rôle of benefactor bored and embarrassed him.

"But don't think I'll ever forget, old man," said Cleve affectionately. "There's mighty few fellows with your kind of luck who remember the rest of us. I shan't forget."

"I wish you would," Peter returned, with a faint expression of distaste. He hated to be reminded that he owed his money to circumstance, and his friends seemed to have the habit of referring to this.

At five minutes to twelve, one morning in July, Cleve emerged, spick and span from his living rooms and entered the office from the private door that connected with his suite. Simultaneously a key turned in the outer door and Peter appeared. That it was the first appearance of both of

them that morning was proven by the white shower of mail on the floor where it had fallen from the chute.

The two young men confronting each other, indisputably guilty of neglecting business, eyed one another in slight confusion for a moment, but being equally culpable relapsed into weak grins of mutual confession.

Peter was perhaps a shade more contrite, for he was thinking less of Cleve's dilatoriness than of his own shameful backsliding. Peter was not groomed, nor was he spick and span. His gray suit was crumpled and spotted, and his collar was not fresh nor his tie well set. Plainly Daniel's hand was absent from its accustomed duties. Peter had not shaved for twenty-four hours, and his chin was lost beneath an ugly, brown stubble which changed his pleasant countenance to something sinister and strange. . . . His gray eyes were bloodshot and yellowed, and he turned them away from Cleve's reproachful face as though the sight of such rectitude sickened and confused him. Without a greeting he stopped and gathered up the scattered letters and went over to his desk with them.

After a moment's hesitation Cleve followed and accepted his own share which Peter surrendered in silence. Cleve had been on his way to the street, but he put his hat and stick aside and sat down to read his letters.

It was a task soon finished. There were two or three envelopes of purely personal character, one of them scented with White Lilac, and this with the others he put away contemptuously in a little drawer already half filled. "They must think I am a fool," he grumbled.

Peter showed a like indifference to his correspondence, or perhaps his disinclination to go into it was merely physical. He pushed it aside, collected the loose papers on his desk

into an untidy heap, and broke the heavy silence which had existed since their entrance.

"So you see, I fell off the water wagon after all," he said in a tone that admitted and defied criticism. It was as if he dared his friend to disapprove of that which bent his spirit in deepest humiliation.

Cleve understood that he was treading on delicate ground, but he could not forbear a slight magnanimity. "Every man has his weak moments, Peter, old man."

Withrow turned on him a slow, sardonic smile under which he winced, though this was instantly concealed. Suddenly he seemed to be back, a ragged little boy with Polinski mended shoes, watching Peter Withrow ride by on his cream colored pony. He knew that Peter never thought of such comparisons, but somehow the vision would not pass.

"And into whose scented boudoir did your particular weakness lead you last night?" Withrow questioned slowly.

Cleve's flush deepened. "Don't be so damned deductive. As it happened, if I was out rather late it was in the interests of business—you know that as well as I. In a town like Cresston it is impossible to get by without the social element mixing in. I think you'll find all the evenings I've spent playing bridge and foxtrotting, and the oceans of tea I've handed around will return us as many loaves and fishes as your endless poring over dry decisions."

Peter regarded him thoughtfully. He was trying to make up his mind about Cleve and he changed his ideas frequently. He thought—"That means, in two words—Rose Dupagny." Aloud he said, "I think you are wrong if you depend to such an extent upon such people. Whatever they might like to do, there are always claims which come before ours.

Laurence Dupagny is morally obligated to half a dozen men who want whatever influence he can throw—and which I don't regret."

"Yet you go there occasionally," reproached Cleve, forgetting to be tactful. "Why—when you like neither of them? Rose spoke of it herself."

"Rose? You are already calling her that?"

"I shouldn't,—to you. But we are friends. She has given me permission to use her name."

Peter did not answer. He was wondering why he should bother about these people. Why not let them find out things themselves. Yet he knew all the time that he would bother,—not because of Cleve or Rose but for another reason far closer to his heart. He made an effort to speak cheerfully in spite of his aching head, which made cheerfulness a difficult matter.

"Never mind. Don't let my perverted tongue annoy you. Perhaps I am jealous; let us say that is the case. Now I daresay the privilege of calling the lady by her Christian name is a favor which entitles you to comradeship which poor devils like myself cannot hope for. Am I right?"

The younger man's face was red and angry; he began to speak violently. "Now, look here, Withrow, I don't want to quarrel with you, but you've got to remember that there are things you haven't the right to pry into. Because you don't believe in women, you judge them all by the same—"

"You are mistaken—I do believe in women—one woman."

"Remarkable."

"I believe in Antonia Christy."

Receiving no reply to this, he glanced at Cleve presently and found him staring fixedly out of the window. Peter went on, not unaware that he was turning a thin knife in the wound. "You see, she is a real woman, fresh and un-

spoiled. The clay of her soul has not been molded to the image of one man and another. I do not believe she would try to persuade you that your career should be tied up in a chiffon petticoat. She is as pristine as newly fallen snow."

Cleve returned his look sullenly. It was his turn to be sardonic. "And as interesting," he finished. "How poetic you are, Peter."

"You would not have said that last month—before you came to know the Dupagnys so well."

The hall door left ajar by Peter's entrance opened noiselessly. Rose Dupagny coming softly along the hall had heard her name mentioned; she heard nothing more, but her tolerant smile indicated that she had heard everything, and at sight of her both young men were thrown into confusion. She enjoyed the effect of her entrance for a wicked moment, then deftly turned the whole thing into a jest.

"Why on earth did I open the door?" she complained, coming into the room and extending to each a slim, gloved hand. "You see how honorable I am? If I wished, I might know what you really think of me." And as if the hand was not enough she gave to each one of her well known glances which most men made no effort to resist. She was forced to draw her fingers from Cleve's restraining clasp, but Peter released the hand he held as soon as he decently could and avoided the glance altogether.

"I was saying that Antonia Christy is the one real woman I know," he explained disagreeably. "I don't think she even owns a powder puff."

Peter interested Rose, though she did not like him; they understood each other far too well. She knew that her pretty mannerisms were an open page to him and that it was useless to pretend. He was sure to be brutal and unforgiving to her petty deceits, just as she disdained the weak-

ness that brought him to such plights as his appearance now displayed. She knew that to cross swords with him meant defeat, but she could not forbear a delicate feminine sneer.

"What a charmingly bucolic person she must be! Who is she? Do you mean that tall girl who wears the dreadful clothes that must have belonged to her grandmother?"

"Just so," Peter agreed equably, "you see, she had such a perfectly corking grandmother."

She offered a good natured smile of capitulation. She knew all about the Christys and their grandmothers and that there was no family in Cresston which could match them. It was not her policy to quarrel openly with Peter Withrow, for only that morning she and her husband had talked seriously about the Withrow money which refused to be inveigled by any inducement Dupagny's cleverness could offer. She had enough self-control to say appreciatively:

"You win, dear Peter," and left the field unhumiliated. Then she turned with quite another smile to Cleve who had been a sulky audience to this exchange of hostilities.

"Don't scold me for coming here," she begged with a charming air of admitting her naughtiness. "I have been promising myself this little escapade ever since you moved in, and this morning when I had to see my dentist on the fourth floor, I rewarded my suffering with this for a treat." She went over to the book cases and began spelling over the titles of the ponderous volumes, pretending to be completely absorbed. "How I love to prowl among all these mysterious papers that you clever men turn into money—only my husband will never allow me in his office. He says that I contaminate its atmosphere with my frivolity." She finished with a light laugh and Cleve Harkness wondered how any man could object to this bright, beautiful creature whose spontaneous smile held no resentment for Peter's rudeness.

As if she read his thought she appealed to him with a mocking pretense of begging for praise. "You wouldn't object to me, would you, Mr. Harkness? Would I disturb *you?*"

The young men exchanged a quick glance—unwillingly, on Cleve's part. Her formal pronouncement of his name was a tacit admission of their secret intimacy and he knew that this was patent to Peter's abnormally keen intuition. His irritability increased; he was even annoyed with Rose for coming there, and he could barely conceal his rising anger against Peter, who seemed determined to make Mrs. Dupagny's visit as unpleasant as possible.

"But you would disturb me—decidedly," Peter interrupted, ill naturedly. "You are disturbing me now. I want to read my letters. They are all from people who want money one way or another, but I like to see how many methods there are for getting it without using physical force. Why don't you take Cleve and go away somewhere? You've planned something that will keep him away from the office most of the afternoon, so be about it whatever it is."

Under cover of their laughter a young girl had entered the room and now stood in the background, undecided whether to intrude upon their gayety. She was bareheaded and dressed in the simple shirtwaist and skirt of an office girl. She had some loose papers in her hand and had evidently come from another office in the same building. When Peter saw her his attitude changed and his glance brought her to his side.

"Mr. Dupagny sent them," she said in a flat, colorless tone as she delivered the papers. "He'll be in to see you later in the day."

She went out with Rose staring after her. There was an immense contrast between the two women—they hardly

seemed to be of the same sex, so great was the difference that marked Rose's brilliant beauty and the simplicity, even humility, of the other, whose face expressed nothing as her clothes possessed no charm.

"My husband's secretary?" Rose questioned when the door closed and at Cleve's assent she added lightly, "There! It proves that I never call upon my husband during business hours. My sin in coming here is increased. The creature did not even know me."

"Are you ever going?" demanded Peter fiercely, scowling at the papers before him.

When she and Cleve were in the open air, Rose made a little gesture of distaste.

"B-rrr! Peter has been drinking again. . . . It is so terrible that his promise cannot be relied upon. You know he gave his word to his father after that affair at Dayton. . . . Sometimes—Cleve—I wonder if you were wise to connect your name with his!"

This was almost a bit of clever mind reading, for Cleve had been thinking the same thing recently. But no sign of this coincidence was in his reply which was benevolent and entirely tolerant of his friend's weakness.

"I will never be dishonored by Peter," he said simply. "If he stumbles once in a while it is only his feet, not his soul."

"Dear Peter," murmured Rose.

CHAPTER VIII

ROSE had no car of her own but Cleve's was parked in the middle of the block and they walked slowly toward it, impelled by an instinct neither refused to admit though pretending to ignore it. The roadster was a smart affair and Rose was beginning to feel a proprietory interest in it.

"Suppose we run out to the Club for a bit of luncheon?" she suggested with the tip of a white gloved finger on the glittering fender.

Guiding the little car through the pleasant activity of Hewlett Avenue with Rose Dupagny beside him, Cleve did not feel much like the little boy who wore other boy's patched trousers, or like the youth who devoured knowledge voraciously behind the dusty windows of Roscoe Christy's office. He was even able to banish the hated memory of Smith's grocery and the weighing of sugar and bacon. He felt proud and rather light-headed from the proximity of the delicately clothed figure that poised closely to him without the faintest contact. . . . In his exhilaration he made the error of driving through Carroll Street, where his father's shop was located, and there was a dreadful half minute when the old dealer might have appeared among the mended chairs and sofas displayed before the door, forcing a recognition painful and humiliating.

But old Saul was not in evidence and the anxious moment passed, to be forgotten in a delicious present.

"How Peter dislikes me," Rose fretted, unable to forget the one man who resisted her. "What was he saying about me? I'm sure it was something fearfully unpleasant."

Cleve frowned. He wanted to forget Peter with other disagreeable memories and he was a little jealous of Rose's continued interest in the subject.

"Who can account for what he thinks?" he answered, shortly. "His whole life is a contradiction. Why let his boorishness worry you?"

"I wanted to see your rooms," confessed Rose with an audacious little smile, "but how glad I am I didn't really pay you the visit I planned. If he had seen me there what could have saved me?"

He reached over and touched her hand caressingly without slowing the swift bird-like flight of the blue roadster.

"He shall not interfere with us. I'm holding you to your promise. My home—the first I've ever had—will never be complete until you've seen it,—sat in the chairs, pulled the curtains about and left your intangible self inside its walls."

They were silent for a little while after that. Rose was trying to analyze her emotions, but to her chagrin she could not capture and control them. She had made men a study and the early stages of an infatuation which centered around her was always diverting and delightful. She loved to encourage adoration, certain always that she possessed the strength to disappoint its demands, and she was so calculating a player in this dangerous game that she was always able to retreat with honor; usually with the lasting admiration of her antagonist.

But now her instinct sensed a difference in the growing intimacy between Cleve Harkness and herself. Try as she would she could not grasp the sure weapon of indifference.

His lightest word interested her; she thrilled at his touch like a school girl. "I am losing my head!" she thought, affrightedly, like a swimmer beyond his depth; but even with this warning she could not draw herself from the dangerous fascination of his companionship.

Cleve was less experienced and yielded more readily to the forces that drew them closer with every hour spent together. He had misgivings as well as Rose, but they were created from widely different causes. His anxiety had to do with his career which was only just beginning; he was too cool-headed not to know that Rose and her gay friends were drawing him swiftly from the current of the ambition he had cherished so long and so deeply. And in spite of his dawning passion he was able to weigh this influence and calculate its menace to himself.

One of the weaknesses of his character was an exaggerated respect for the social element which dominated Cresston, but he offered the same excuse to his conscience for this that he had given Peter Withrow. He claimed that these gay, inconsequential people had their uses and that he was using them. It salved the accusation of his intelligence.

The intoxicating sweetness of his close association with Rose Dupagny was fed by the knowledge that once she had been as far from him as the stars, yet now she was coming slowly into his heart. In the lean days of his beginning she had been a bright figure, remote and charming to his wistful imagination, but he had never hoped to come within the radius of her gay smile. He remembered that period of his life with tolerant pity. Then he had only cared for books,—the musty old books in Judge Christy's library. He was æons removed from the boy who had been asked to Sunday tea by Bessie Wickersham, but he was still

balanced enough to be grateful to that boy, while he despised him for those grinding years of poverty and debasement which had given the foundation on which he now stood secure, in spite of the enticements that encroached more and more upon his life.

Rose did not return to town in Cleve's car. They had an uninterrupted hour at a veranda table and she was still mistress enough of her social instincts to see the folly of identifying herself too completely with one man when a month ago she had laughed at a score. Cleve protested against her desertion, but she remained firm and waved him adieu from a group of irreproachable matrons who were cutting for bridge.

They welcomed her so sweetly that she was alarmed. She was popular among women, but she never forgot their power of turning a confidence into a guillotine. These women were all her intimates; they imitated the way she did her hair and asked her to all their parties. They had witnessed a hundred harmless flirtations of hers, but to-day she felt on guard against them. She covered her faint self-consciousness with a laughing allusion to Cleve's youth, and fought savagely against a blush that threatened to betray her.

"When he is thirty he will be the débutante's dream," she predicted with a little worldly-wise air.

Nina Harper tinkled her artificial laugh.

"Jack says he will be the Governor by that time," she said, opening her diamond suit, "and married to the richest girl in Cresston."

It was nearly four when Cleve got back to the office and he found Peter still there. He was sitting before his desk much as he had been sitting three hours earlier, and the confused heap of papers before him was augmented by the

scattered sheets of two or three newspapers. He was not reading; he was not working; he hardly seemed to be thinking. He was still unkempt, demolished, as he had been when Cleve saw him last, and now Cleve, entering from the summer sunshine and from the pleasant conventionality of the Club where the immaculate loveliness of the women pervaded everything like a heady perfume, flung a glance of barely concealed disgust at the soiled inertia of the office.

Intercepting this look Peter returned it with a bloodshot glance of his own that held some secret menace of his brooding hours. Cleve, pretending not to be aware of this, was about to pass into his rooms when Peter spoke in a harsh, strange voice.

"This is a damned fine way to run an office, isn't it?" he said. "You following women about, and I, helplessly drunk."

It could be seen then that he had moved several times in those lonely hours—as far as the mahogany cellarette, at least, for the door of this receptacle hung slightly ajar and the timber of his voice was indefinably altered.

Halted in this fashion, a dull flush crept over Cleve's face. He had a moment's difficulty in preventing a sudden flame from leaping from the smoldering anger in his breast which had been there since his early encounter with his partner. He managed to speak calmly.

"I wouldn't say that, Withrow. You'll hate it to-morrow. See here, hadn't you better trot along home now and let Daniel fix you up? I'll phone for your car and a man to drive. We can't do any work to-day—it's four, already. To-morrow we'll start in fresh." He turned away, dismissing the wretched scene with an air of patience. There was something in him, a cool immaculateness, that set him safely apart from the sordid waste of the other. He was

about to free himself from it by closing the door of his own rooms.

Peter, rising, made a pitiful gesture. He attempted to rest his unsteady hand on the desk, but miscalculated the distance, and his slipping fingers sent a flurry of papers to the floor. He sat down heavily and his head drooped forward. "I'm a beast," he said.

Cleve hesitated; then he came over and put a comforting hand on the bowed shoulder. There are few things in life more elevating to the spirit than ministering to a penitent by means of a light touch on the shoulder. The action restored Cleve to his usual frame of mind.

"Don't speak of yourself like that," he urged, kindly. "You know we talked all that over, and I understand you if others don't. We've both got our faults and it's lucky they're not the same ones. You'll be fit in the morning and we'll tackle this work."

"Damn you," said Peter, looking up coldly. "Don't preach to me."

It was no use trying to cover the enmity that lay between them like a sword. Cleve started back and his face took on a strange hardness that changed it beyond belief. He collected his thoughts which had been scattered by Peter's outrageous assault and answered deliberately.

"I'll take back all I said awhile ago. You are a drunkard—yes, and a beast, if you think so. You are the best judge of that. But what I'd like to know is—why take this tone with me?"

To his surprise Peter laughed—not that the queer, strangling sound was laughter, but it might pass as such. With a rapid change of mood he regained the ghost of his lazy, sardonic temper. Having forced Cleve's hidden resent-

ment to the open, he was able to take a calmer measure of the quarrel which had come between them.

"That's right," he agreed, equably. "I'm all that and more, and I'd rather you said it than thought it about me. You see, the transmission of thought is so much more powerful than plain speech, that the vibration of your concealed emotion is poisonous to a dangerous degree. I have a chronic aversion to any man going about thinking of me as a beast. The thought waves from such a source cannot help but create insidious injury—"

"What are you talking about?" Cleve interrupted roughly. "If you have anything to say to me, let's hear it. I won't quarrel with you to-day, Peter, but I will to-morrow, if you still insist on it."

"I don't want to quarrel at all," Peter returned smoothly; "I only want to offer my opinion of you in return for your frankness. You are making a fool of yourself over a woman."

The name both had avoided leapt between them, instantly tearing down the walls of reserve no other subject could destroy.

"Are you in love with Rose Dupagny yourself?" Cleve asked.

For answer Peter laughed again, but this time there was a note of sincerity in his mirth. The hostilities between the two which, oddly enough, rested at their peak seemed to clear his brain and reduce the fever of his brooding fury. He laughed until Cleve's anger, which exceeded his own, showed signs of breaking through the younger man's control; then he ceased as suddenly as he had begun and stood up, making a swift adjustment of his disordered toilette. Miraculously the outward signs of his downfall vanished

and except for his unshaven face he might have passed muster among other men.

"What can you expect of a beast?" he said in a sort of bitter raillery. "I'll not ask your pardon for insulting you, Harkness, but I'll excuse you now if you want to change your collar."

As Cleve went into his apartment he heard Peter cross the floor. Then the door shut noisily. By listening carefully he could hear steps going down the stairs. The rooms were on the second floor and it was like Peter to ignore the inefficient elevator service.

When this sound had quite passed away, he dismissed his immediate and active anger and turned his thoughts to the possible bearing this scene might have upon his affairs. At the same time he remembered a number of minor necessities which pressed upon his attention. He had some telephoning to do and a few letters to write. Later on came a dinner engagement that was certain to wind up with a veranda dance at the Club. There were a number of things to crowd into the next three hours, but there was a corner of his mind which he kept clear to devote to the unparalleled behavior of Peter Withrow.

Cleve had a curious mind. It was like a honeycomb. Each tiny cell was separate and complete and in no way encroached upon another. Thus it was possible for him to devote as clear and deductive reasoning to the color of a morning tie as to the working of a brief, and with perfect fairness he divided his mental processes between the things that concerned him most. It was important for him to maintain his present connection with Peter, aside from the genuine personal liking he had felt in the beginning for his erratic partner, and he wondered rather sadly why his friend had suddenly shown so marked a change. It would

be awkward if a serious difference should arise and their partnership be threatened. He knew that such a condition would have far-reaching consequences as regarded himself, for he was by no means certain that he was strong enough to stand alone. Considering Peter and himself dispassionately he was struck anew by the complete unfairness of fate in dividing her bounties. Peter Withrow had everything to begin with, good birth, money, a flawless education and a father who dressed irreproachably and wore a pince-nez as though he had been born with it. Yet he was living up to none of these advantages. It might even be said that he was living them down as fast as possible. Cleve disdained the existence of his own father's second hand shop, yet it was old Saul's spirit that spoke in him when he counted the other's blessings. He hated to see anything wasted and Peter was a spendthrift with his good luck.

There seemed to be no end to his backsliding. More than once he appeared to have a hold on himself, promising a complete reversal of the fatal weakness that sapped his character, but it always ended in something like the scene of to-day. There was no depending on Peter.

The thought crossed Cleve's mind that perhaps Rose Dupagny had been right—the association might be the wrong thing for him after all, but second thought dispelled this doubt. The name of Withrow had always been honored in Cresston. It had its value and even in the degeneration of Peter there was a certain savor of the great. Weighing everything in the infinitesimal scales of his mind, he decided that Rose was wrong.

But the appearance of her name in his thoughts was the end of speculation about Peter. He would see her to-night. They would dance together; there would be a chance for a few words under the very eyes of their curious world.

Peter and his idiosyncrasies could wait until to-morrow.

It was after six when Nina Harper's coupé brought Rose to her door. Nina had stopped at her own house in a belated spasm of anxiety about her children's tea, and Rose was glad of this when she saw Laurence Dupagny marching up and down the flagged walk with the furious and futile energy which she recognized as the inevitable prelude of a quarrel with herself.

She passed him with a nod that effectually concealed her instant resentment of what she termed "espionage" on his part. But she was not rid of him so easily for he followed her to her room and entered determinedly, though her attitude coldly dismissed him. When the door was closed he demanded harshly, "Where have you been?"

She was removing her hat with the carefulness of a dainty woman and she folded her veil and pierced it with two silver pins before she replied non-committally: "The Country Club—bridge—Tea."

"But before that?"

She had a glimpse of his face through the cheval mirror and it startled her into serious thought. She might have gained time by a trivial inquiry, "Why do you ask?" but instead she said calmly:

"I had luncheon out there with Cleve Harkness."

"And you went to his office for him?" snarled Dupagny, coming toward her. "By God! You followed that boy to his own doors. You can't keep away from him!"

She turned and surveyed him coolly. Her heart was beating fast, but he could not guess that. Before she replied she walked to a closet and put her hat away deliberately, finding a nook for it upon a crowded shelf among other hats and covering the whole array with a shelf cloth. This gave her a moment to think and when she looked

at him again she said: "Yes, I went to his office—his and Peter Withrow's. You asked me to keep in touch with Peter, but how could I when he comes here so seldom? When I stopped in this morning I found him lamentably drunk and Mr. Harkness relieved my embarrassment by asking me to lunch with him."

"Your embarrassment—yours!" he sneered.

"If you are being merely abusive—"

There had been so many of these scenes between them. If Cleve Harkness was not the man it would be another. She was not afraid of Dupagny's anger or jealousy, she held his importance too lightly; but she wondered how he had learned of her visit and this troubled her until she remembered the girl who had brought Peter the papers. "Ah!" she thought, realizing the significance of this, and felt a glow of triumph and justification at her discovery. If she had not known Dupagny's stenographer, it was evident that she herself had been recognized.

"What are you smiling about?" Dupagny demanded suspiciously, but she turned the subject deftly. She was far too wise to humiliate him.

"Larry, who are the Christys—really?"

"The Christys—why?"

"Tell me."

He frowned impatiently. He suspected her of evasion and was certain that there was more deceit beyond than he had discovered, but he gave her an answer. "They are nobody now. Once they were rather important, but every one has forgotten them. What are you trying to find out?"

Rose began loosening her hair. It veiled her like a fine black web. Beneath its shelter she could say what she chose.

"They will be important again. Peter Withrow is in

love with the girl, and she will probably refuse to marry him because he drinks. Then he will go to the dogs faster than ever and take his money with him. Nobody will ever benefit by it. . . ."

"How do you know all this? Did Harkness tell you?" He could not forget his jealousy.

But Rose was tired of this bootless talk. "How stupid you are," she said coldly. "Please let me dress. Have you forgotten that we are going to the Harpers' to-night? You haven't much time."

He left her in peace then, but when she went into his room a half hour later she found him lying sprawled in a wide, low chair, asleep.

She stood looking without awakening him, though the hands of the clock were crawling perilously near to seven. All afternoon she had been thinking of Cleve; his face smiled at her through the senseless cards she played so surely, and through the chatter of women's voices she heard only his, deep-toned and tender. While she dressed she had been remembering his eyes and the touch of his hand on her arm as he helped her into the car. It was into this reverie that her husband had broken with his veiled accusations, his crude jealousies which she resented and despised, because he had never failed to use her beauty and charm when he could.

Yet she watched him in thoughtful silence making an inventory of the tragic disclosures of sleep. There were hollows in his temples and beneath his eyes. His mouth sagged. With an impulse of pity she bent over him and turned his face gently, so that his cheek rested against a cushion.

CHAPTER IX

ANTONIA CHRISTY, in a washed white muslin and black straw sailor hat, walked downtown one hot morning, and, crossing the Square under the shade of the dusty elms, entered the broad open doors of the Sheridan Building.

It was a quiet hour and the marble foyer was cool and empty. She was glad of this because in the last few minutes her courage had deserted her rapidly, and she feared a crowd, notwithstanding the shelter she would have found in one.

Antonia had no experience with such magnificence as the mind of Laurence Dupagny had conceived when he outlined the plans of the big building and dressed it to suit his fancy. To her it seemed a vast labyrinth of uncharted entrances and corridors, and her pride winced before the childish prospect of losing her way and having to ask directions of some jostling stranger. As she stepped inside she called her mind contemptuously to order while her timid feet longed to turn about and run from the possibility of confusion.

At her first glance the place seemed to be deserted after the lazy bustle of the street, but when her eyes became accustomed to the shadow she saw that there were people there, after all. A girl with a hard, pretty face was before a telephone board that guarded a row of glassed-in booths, and at the news and cigar stands there were others, modishly

dressed, cool and efficient and delicately pretty. She asked one of them where Mr. Peter Withrow's office was and became instantly aware of her blunder when the girl gave her a polite, incredulous look. Antonia knew nothing about directories, but she saw the large, black-framed list of names as the question left her lips.

The news stand girl smiled tolerantly. "I believe Mr. Withrow is on the second," she explained languidly. "Ask the elevatorman. He'll show you."

But there was no elevator though the black and gold grill held space for three, and as Antonia had no mind for further mistakes she sought the stairs which ascended in flights from the side of the cage. As she went up the steps she felt the eyes of all these hostile women upon her half-worn shoes and the cheap stockings that covered her ankles, and swift, haughty anger burned away her humiliation. How dared they look at her so? She caught herself remembering that she was Antonia Christy, and that such people should not be looking at her at all.

But she swiftly forgot them as she reached the top of the first flight, for suddenly she was in the midst of adventure. She had planned this excursion so often and so unbelievingly that each commonplace step held the virtue of the unexpected. All of her life she had walked patiently in the footsteps of a thousand women, but now she was upon unknown ground. At any moment one of those silent doors which confronted her in impassive rows, might open and disclose something forbidden and interesting.

But as it happened she met no one. The long, echoing hallways of the second floor were empty, as she walked timidly along. Reading the names upon the doors, she felt the courage of her pride ebbing slowly until all the revivify-

ing resolutions with which she had abandoned seclusion that morning seemed to have vanished.

Unexpectedly she came upon the right door, at the very moment she felt herself routed by the silence. She might have failed even then but that the names upon the glass panel fascinated her and she stood reading them over and over as though she had never seen them before—"Peter B. Withrow." "Cleveland Harkness." She had known them both since early childhood, but she had never seen them lettered in fat gold script, and in this disguise they were completely unfamiliar.

Peter, opening the door, found her on the threshold. He uttered her name in an astonished voice and stepped back into the room. He had his hat on but removed it, running his fingers nervously through his dark hair.

"I've come to ask for a position, Peter, if there is anything I can do," said Antonia in a low, steady voice.

They both sat down, Antonia in a straight chair and Peter at his desk. Under the spell of his easy, welcoming smile she began to lose her misgivings and the sense of unreality which had confused her. She smiled back at him, sure, as she always was, that he would understand.

"I've done it at last," she said.

Peter gradually lost his smile and taking up a paper weight began turning it around in his fingers. His mouth looked grave. "Does your father know of this, Antonia?" he asked.

"Not yet. It will make him angry, of course, when he does know, and he will object, but—" she made an impelling gesture, "I told you I meant to do it, Peter." In a lower tone she added, "I must."

He looked up. "Is it as bad as that, Tony?"

"Very bad, Peter."

He knew how hard it was for her to speak of her intimate thoughts and waited patiently for her to begin. What she had to say was not new to him for they had often talked together of the ambition that had been growing in her breast since she was a little girl, and while Peter had never tried to thwart or discourage this, he had not dreamed the time was coming when she would break the shackles of custom and turn to him for help. When she remained silent he spoke guardedly. "Have you thought about what the town will say, Antonia?"

"The town!" She smiled faintly. "It is the world I am trying to enter that matters. This doesn't sound like you, Peter. . . . Are you trying to frighten me?"

He could not forget that she was a young girl in spite of her wide reading, and this put a restraint on the things he wanted to explain. But as he saw beneath the girlish exterior the fixed purpose, carefully thought out and coolly planned, his heart began to beat with dizzying elation. The thought that she had come to him of all men was like an intoxicating draught, yet he knew that he must dissuade her if he could.

"I am trying to remind you that we live in a little world that counts, however we ignore it," he said gravely. "This is queer talk, coming from me, for I have defied all its petty rules, but I am a man and you are a woman, Antonia, and the censure that I can disdain will strike into your soul."

"Why should I be censured?"

He had no answer ready for this, beyond the trivial excuses of society, and when he voiced the first of these it sounded lamentably tame and weak. "Harkness and I are young men, and I, at least, have a beastly reputation.

If you insist on a career of some sort, why not take up a woman's occupation? There are a dozen things you might do. You could earn money—be independent without—without—"

She stood up. She was pale, but she spoke in an even voice.

"I see that I was wrong. You do not understand, after all. I will have to try again. . . ."

"Don't go!" He was on his feet, his hand touching her arm. Their faces were close together. "I do understand, Antonia. Don't you see that I am not speaking for myself, but from the viewpoint of others. . . . They count, though we despise them—when a woman is in question. It is because I want to save you the least pain—"

Their eyes met. In hers the beginning of startled wonder asked a question; in his something quick and alive answered so swiftly that if she had been like other women she must have known. But Antonia's lessons had come from dust-dry books, not from the pulse of humanity, so that what she saw was lost to her and she dismissed the faintly speculative thought which for a moment had disturbed her.

"I shall never live at home as I have done," she replied steadily, and there was such force behind her words that he admitted his defeat. "If you will not let me work for you, I will ask some one else. I will find a position, for I am willing to work for very little and I am neat and accurate. That is what they always ask for, isn't it? Neatness and accuracy—and some one will give me the chance which you and my father deny me. After awhile this little world, whose opinion you respect so much, will admit that I am right; even my father must come to see in time that I am a Christy as well as he, and that it is possible for a woman to be what he would have wished for his son."

"Will you stay here and let me help you all I can, Antonia?" asked Peter.

An hour later Cleve Harkness came into the office and Peter told him that he had engaged Antonia Christy as copying clerk. He watched Cleve's face quizzically as this intelligence reached him, but he was not prepared for his partner's vehement objection to the scheme.

"Good Lord, Withrow, what did you do that for?" was the other's protest. "Antonia knows nothing about business. She's self-taught, and we could have a dozen trained secretaries for the asking—"

"That's what they would have been—trained secretaries," Peter admitted equably. "But Antonia wants to be something better than that. She's our apprentice, Harkness. In two or three years she'll probably be a member of the firm."

Cleve threw him an incredulous glance. "You can't be serious. She is not thinking of—law."

"Just that. Why not? The men of her family have always been legal lights. She has the brains that would have belonged to a Christy son—and her father is one of the best read men in the state. It is only his antiquated ideas that prevent her from reading with him."

A slow angry flush began to creep into Cleve's face. The light twitching of the muscles in the corners of his mouth betrayed the protests he wished to utter yet controlled, but he could not keep the sneer from his voice. "I suppose you encouraged her in this nonsense. . . . We'll be ridiculous in the eyes of the town—"

"Why should we try to please the town. . . . It will fall in line soon enough when Antonia shows what she can do. . . ." Unconsciously Peter was quoting Antonia herself and he saw that Cleve recognized the argument.

"That's suffragette talk," the younger man said impa-

tiently. "What if she has a brain—any amount of brain? Why should we have her here? Antonia is not fit for office routine and will spend half her time learning the ropes, while we struggle to remember that she is an old friend and mustn't be scolded. Why didn't you send her over to Wickersham's? There're a half dozen girls there and between them they'd have taken off the raw edges."

The look that he hated came into Peter's eyes. "Antonia has no raw edges," Peter said, "and while we're on the subject perhaps I'd better explain that the affair is between her and myself. If I undertake Antonia's education it must be after methods of my own. I don't believe I'd care to share my first pupil with any one."

Cleve answered in a furious tone, "When old Christy hears of it there'll be the deuce to pay. I refuse to accept any of the blame. I am certain he knows nothing about it."

"Probably not. But he will before Antonia comes here. She's to have a talk with him to-night, I believe."

The differences of these two always stopped on the edge of an open break. For a reason unacknowledged by both they avoided a serious encounter and had fallen into the dangerous habit of frank speech. Between other men this would have proved disastrous, but Cleve and Peter were upon a sort of mental leash that always pulled them asunder when their teeth were bared; and they submitted to this because of the invisible forces which, unknown to themselves, held them where they must touch each other daily, even while they rebelled helplessly at the contact.

The affair of Antonia Christy was not mentioned again between them that day, though it was present in the mind of each through all the details of the afternoon. Already the young firm was busier than it had a right to be in a town overflowing with young lawyers who had served their

country. Cleve had been correct in his estimate of the importance of the Withrow connection, for under its persuasion clients appeared who might otherwise have doubted. He admitted this with the reservation that, when he had proved himself, these same people who placed a man's origin before his brains would remain loyal to *his* cleverness, not Peter's name and money. Looking into a bright future, Cleve could not visualize failure. Presently he would be strong enough to stand alone and then he would banish Peter and obligations to Peter from his mind, just as other disagreeable things had been banished. He rejoiced in his faculty for making friends. He would have made a friend of Peter had that been possible, but the other seemed determined to affront him whenever he could. Cleve had never quite rid his mind of the suspicion that Peter was in love with Rose, and that jealousy was at the bottom of these frequent disagreements. This theory flattered him and explained everything. It gave him the right to be magnanimous. Rose's name had become a carefully guarded subject between the two, and this silence served to augment Cleve's certainty. . . . When he was away from Peter's sardonic tongue he forgot rancour and was even sorry for his unlucky friend—for Cleve had none of those ugly faults—malice, unkindness, or hatred of his fellow men. The world had been good to him and it was getting better every day and he loved the world as he loved life. He had a hundred friends where other men had two, and all he asked of these friends was that they help him, when they could, a little further on the road he traveled so steadily. . . .

He had not seen Antonia for a long time; he had almost forgotten her, and her unexpected emergence from obscurity was an irksome thought that annoyed as it intruded upon him. He wished he might see her for a moment, but

there was no chance of that. He could not call at the house now, for he had never called there since his return. There was not a chance in a thousand of meeting her on the street if he walked about for hours, and, finally, weary of the reiteration, he tried to dismiss the whole matter from his thoughts, consoling himself with the reflection that it couldn't happen. Antonia would be prevented from intruding herself where she was manifestly out of place. Cleve was one of the many men who rather helplessly rail at women for emerging persistently from the place where Nature and custom has settled them. He was certain that he could have talked Antonia out of the notion in half an hour if he could have seen her alone.

CHAPTER X

ANTONIA waited to have her talk with her father until supper was over and he had gone out on the front porch to read the evening paper. Mrs. Christy was gravitating between the kitchen and the dining-room, unconscious of the impending storm, when the sound of their voices reached her. She listened for a moment, then put down the plates she was holding and went to the door.

Since Antonia's childhood she had known that these two were "set against each other," and she was always on the alert to make herself a buffer between them at the first hint of conflict. But now perspicuity had failed her and she stood working her fingers together, listening to the beginning of a cataclysmic scene.

Antonia leaned against one of the rotting pillars, facing her father who sat in the old hammock chair. The Cresston *Evening Herald* was on his knees and his pipe, suspended between two fingers, had the appearance of being shocked into immobility. He was looking at his daughter from beneath heavy, graying brows, and his head began to sway slightly to and fro as the meaning of her words came to him, as an old bull sways, taunted by some half-forgotten menace of its youth. Antonia had finished her low rapid speech before her mother came to the door, but Mrs. Christy was in time to hear his reply.

"You are going to work—work—for Peter Withrow? Is that what you said—?" he demanded in a thick voice.

"Oh, Antonia—" interjected her mother, murmurously. "Oh, Antonia! What have you done?"

He turned to her. "What do you know of this, madam? How much of it is your fault?"

"Don't blame my mother." Antonia interrupted quickly, and though she did not move, the impression was given that her body was between them, holding them away from each other. "You know, father, that I have always wanted this. It is what I have lived for."

He gave her a long look and his head rolled a little to one side. A faint, purplish color began to creep over his neck to his cheeks, which became blotched with this ugly flush. "I know nothing about what you want . . . you will stay at home and help your mother. . . . I will see Withrow in the morning . . . not the boy—his father."

"If you prevent me from going into that office," said Antonia clearly, just as she had spoken to Peter, "I shall go elsewhere. I am twenty-one and my life is my own."

"If your life is your own, you may live it elsewhere than under my roof," he responded, the purple deepening. "You cannot stay here and insult me. Christy women have never been degraded. . . . You will be the first. . . . Don't argue. . . . I will not hear any more."

He was gasping a little, but he picked up the paper as though he meant to read and his fingers tightened on the pipe. But Antonia was not deceived. She knew that he was suffering, that she was the cause of his pain, and that these movements were mere pretexts to cover his emotion. She could not bear to part from him like this—to let a night solidify his resentment toward herself. It was difficult for her to make overtures, but she went to him tenderly.

"Listen, father," she said, "why won't you let me help *you* instead of mother? Give me a chance—try me—"

He got up heavily. "I shall see Withrow in the morning," he said, and went into the house; passing Mrs. Christy who shrank against the wall.

During this brief encounter the voices of father and daughter had barely been raised above their ordinary tones and the words themselves were simple and unemphatic, but to Mrs. Christy's ears the fret of a dying nation could have been no more appalling. She wrung her hands and whispered over again, "Antonia! What have you done!"

Antonia turned her face away. She could not bear to look at her mother, for it was like gazing into a wound which she herself had made. What had she done? Her heart quivered with the newness of the break between herself and her parents. She was like a little child leaving a lighted doorway to go forward alone in the dark, and there was enough of the child yet remaining in her to wonder if her father meant all he had said. Unconsciously her mother answered this question.

"You can't go against your father, child. You know how set he is. He's showed us all these years that he won't bend—"

But neither would Antonia bend. Fear passed and she grasped resolution again. She smiled into the shadows that were turning to blackness under the trees.

The lights of the town began to shine like glow worms through the thick-leafed branches that canopied the streets. Faint sounds of the awakening life of evening came to them; the shrill whistle of a marauding boy; the gay horn of a motor; the clanging of a street car bell. All these little things, so commonplace in their way, spelled freedom to Antonia. She was going to be a part of them to-morrow. She would have a place of her own, even in the smallness of Cresston. Some day her hands would help to make the

wheels of progress go round; she looked down upon their slimness now—their idleness was appalling.

Mrs. Christy thought her warning had conquered. She could not picture actual disobedience from one of her children and her volatile mind rejected the importance of what she had overheard.

With the intention of diverting Antonia's thoughts, she came to the steps and peered into the shadowy street, where girls were strolling with their arms around other girls and small boys were darting back and forth like gnomes. She could not discover her own among them and she began to fret.

"I am positive that Donnie is with those Judson boys again. I don't trust the red-haired one. He has a strange countenance and it is quite impossible to make him look you in the face. Every evening Donnie loiters for a full half hour at their corner. I have watched them, and I say that it must cease. Antonia, will you walk to the next block with me? I am not afraid, of course, but the shadow of those elms is rather dense."

Long after they returned with the reluctant Donnie and the house had grown silent from his protests, Roscoe Christy got up heavily from the chair where he had been sitting since he came into the middle room. It was bedtime and he fulfilled all the small duties that were the custom of a life time. When he had attended to these there was only the watch left to wind.

He took it from the peg against the wall above the fireplace, but before he touched the key he looked long and somberly at the round face that lay in his hand. He had not misconstrued Antonia's silence as surrender, for in her he saw himself and the will that all through his life had been like a crushing weight against his breast, forcing him

inexorably into a course from which all his tender impulses rebelled. He knew that she had not spoken until what she meant to do was irrevocable, and during the hours just passed he had been thinking what to do. There were but two ways. He could yield to her will or he could hold to his own.

But he had not yet found the answer. Presently he began to wind the watch slowly in even, regular rotation. Every night for years and years the watch had been wound. It never ran down and its grim, small hands moved endlessly on, as though marking time for eternity. He returned it to its place and it began its journey, boldly counting the seconds in clear, loud, infinitesimal strokes, as though it meant to continue this forever. He turned away, comforted in a small measure. . . . In some obscure way the watch seemed to symbolize a link between the dead years and the present. While its hands still moved the thin thread that bound the family to its days of pride could not be broken.

CHAPTER XI

CLEVE HARKNESS had never missed a Country Club dance since his meteoric entrance into Cresston society, and if in the beginning he made a point of this for the purpose of cultivating social clients, his purpose gradually changed until another and far different object became paramount. The Saturday night dance gave him a chance to see Rose Dupagny with a freedom which the rest of the week did not afford.

His visits to her house had almost ceased, for Rose was a little disturbed by her husband's obstinate jealousy, and had confided this annoyance to her friend. They agreed that it was best to yield something to the unreasonableness of Laurence Dupagny.

Rose was impatient at the restriction so suddenly placed upon her actions by the man who, she considered, had lost his right to dictate to her. She could not recall the time when she had not amused herself with other men and her husband's indifference to this was one of the early reasons for her loss of respect for him. He had always urged her to interest the men whose favor he was seeking and she believed his dislike for Cleve to be merely impatience at her alliance with a source he considered unimportant and unproductive. That is, in the beginning she had made herself believe this, but of late she had not faced the question honestly.

The weekly dance gave the two an opportunity to be

together under the good-natured chaperonage of their friends who were tolerant of married flirtations. The roster of the club included nearly everybody of importance in Cresston, but the handful of women who really dictated the social life of the town saw to it that the little dances included only those whose secret fellowship made them persons of gayety and discretion.

Only here among her intimates did Rose venture to let the excitement and glamor of this new interest sway her from her careful poise. She believed in these women; they had a thousand secrets like her own, tumultuous and poignant; pausing at the very edge of reality; gazing into the heart of an impossible happiness, yet thrilled with fear at the thought of touching this forbidden paradise. She did not fear betrayal from them or serious hurt from this experience. She believed it would pass as other fancies had passed.

Cleve accepted the restrictions placed upon his friendship with Rose in a less quiescent manner. At times he was coldly angry with himself for having yielded so completely to the influence of a woman, reviewing with alarm the inroads which the affair was making on his time, but a day spent away from her and the sound of her voice always stripped him of these mental calculations which ordered him to throw this passion into the discard.

After Rose telephoned on Saturday morning he was in a fever of impatience until the moment came when they could meet. She explained carefully the directions which he was to follow so that even their friends would be deceived. The Dupagnys were dining with Willetta Porter and the two young women would drive to the club later, with Rose's husband as escort. Rose made it very clear

that Cleve was to stay away from her until the middle of the evening.

The time stretched like a desert before him and the thought of being in the same room with her and unable to claim her at once was unendurable. He thought of his father and the two hours that must elapse before he could start for the club, and which might be employed in one of the infrequent visits to the old second hand dealer which conscience demanded of him.

Old Saul no longer lived in the room behind the store, but occupied a small cottage in the older part of town where, to his astonishment, Cleve found him in bed.

Such a phenomenon had never happened before and Cleve was almost embarrassed by the familiarity of such a meeting. But his father scouted the notion of illness. He was merely resting, he said. The summer had been unnaturally hot; Cresston water was bad; he had a dozen excuses for his indisposition which he insisted was of no consequence.

Cleve thought that he looked like a repulsive image, propped among the frowzy pillows, but he carefully excluded this unfilial fancy from his expression as he inquired solicitously after his father's well-being. He was far too sensitive to public opinion to risk its censure by neglecting the old man who had so cruelly neglected his own childhood.

"You must have a doctor," he said, as he got up to go. "I will send Heppleton over in the morning—" adding as an afterthought and with unconscious sarcasm, "I'll pay for the call, of course."

As he was going out of the room he heard his father laughing in a strained high tone that in some way reminded him of Peter's laughter when he was accused of being in love with Rose. He was unreasonably annoyed by this, for

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it seemed to imply obscurely that he was the subject of mirth for which he possessed no key.

"Why are you laughing?" he demanded, frowning from the threshold of the cluttered room.

Old Saul choked. "Your kindness. I am so grateful for the doctor—but remember, you're to pay. I can't afford such nonsense, of course."

His son looked at him suspiciously. He recognized mockery without relation to this dried husk in whom laughter was incredible and unreal. But he was too anxious to escape from the unwholesome place to ask more questions; he had a fastidious desire to cleanse himself by contact with the fresh air ouside, before the doubtful aroma of poverty and squalor identified itself with his clothing and such portions of his body as had been forced to meet it. But he was not to avoid all this so easily after all, for old Saul, sitting up suddenly, beckoned with a dreadful, skinny arm for his return.

"You've gone along with the best of 'em, haven't you, boy?" he said, letting his eyes rove over the young man's figure down to his white spats, incongruously perfect before the background of the room. Cleve felt his patience leaving him as his soul sickened before the proof of his origin which never failed to daunt him.

"Is that all you have to say?" he asked, impatient to be gone.

"I hear you're doing well in your business," the old man went on. "You've managed yourself well. You're a son to be proud of. You'll know how to take care of money when you get it."

But Cleve had had enough of this. He shook off his father's hand and turned resolutely to the door. "I've got to go now. I'm due somewhere in an hour. Try to take

care of yourself and eat decent food. I'll tell Heppleton to look after you."

When he was in the street he shook himself mentally and physically to be rid of the effluvia of such surroundings. "Pah," he thought, with disgust of himself, "to have come from that!"

The encounter with his past was so depressing that, for the moment, even the prospect of seeing Rose lost its allure and he walked aimlessly through the dusky, elm shaded streets of the old town, gloomily desirous of conquering the memories which beset him.

It was a night of threatened rain and the humid, oppressive atmosphere and splashing drops that fell now and then had driven the summer night strollers to the shelter of their porches where they watched breathlessly for the storm to break. The street was empty but Cleve could see the dim shapes of these people huddled together in ridiculous safety, hiding under roof and shingles from the clean downpour that would come presently. Without realizing it they preferred the dust.

He had walked from his rooms to his father's house and, returning, the blocks seemed unnaturally long and tedious. He wanted to get away from the neighborhood and the associations that seemed to lay live hands upon him, dragging him back to ignominy. He had come far, but not far enough to forget. . . . He thought of Rose, so beautiful and dainty. What would she think of the sordidness of his past if she could know it as it really was? When he recalled the old man in his filthy room and the close kinship between himself and that condition, contrasting this picture with Rose waiting in her immaculateness for him, he shuddered, wondering if he dared touch her when they met.

A figure, coming suddenly from the thick darkness, almost

collided with him in passing, and he recognized it with the swift readjustment of the faculties which an unexpected meeting brings. It was Antonia Christy and she was carrying a heavy suitcase that caused her slight body to bend toward him in her effort to balance the weight.

He stopped short, forgetting, in a swift rush of surprise, the thoughts which had troubled him.

The unexpectedness of the encounter left them both speechless, staring fixedly at each other for a moment. Antonia's face, springing delicately from the thick darkness, held a faint illumination such as is seen on the wings of a white moth. It was as though her bodiless presence hung there suspended before his eyes, recalling him from the brooding fancies of retrospection. But his material mind rejected this impression as it was formed.

"Where are you going, Antonia?" he cried in a sort of alarm. For weeks he had hardly remembered her existence, yet to see her now, alone in the street at nightfall, when every one had vanished before the coming storm, brought a sense of shock as though he must witness a threatened hurt to some cherished thing. His mind abandoned everything but the fact that she was here. He asked again before she could reply, "Where are you going?"

Her surprise at the encounter was equal to his own, but she recovered herself no less quickly. She had been walking very slowly, her slight body sagging under the weight of the heavy bag. At the sound of his voice a luminous smile dawned in her troubled eyes and in spite of her clumsy burden she stood erect. "I am going to Mrs. Miller's boarding-house," she answered simply. "I am to live there."

"Live there! You—" his words crowded upon each other, "what do you mean— What has happened?" He

was too amazed to speak coherently. What she said was like a puzzle forced upon his unwilling comprehension which must find the answer. He waited for her to explain, with a queer, cruel tenderness that longed to punish while he defended her action.

The heavy darkness of the laden sky pressed upon them; the air was so still and lifeless that the faint intake of Antonia's breath made a vibration of sound, startling and infinitesimal. Even the stray raindrops were withheld for the moment as though to gain momentum for the onslaught that was to follow.

The dim outline of her face was appealing and soft, but her voice had a grave resoluteness when she said, continuing her explanation, "I have left home . . . there was nothing else to do."

He turned about to walk with her, for she had barely paused to listen or reply. He did this unwillingly; angry with her for having intruded herself upon his thoughts, yet forced to comply with some inner command widely at variance with his conscious desire. They had walked a little way side by side in silence before he remembered the suitcase and took it from her, disregarding her gentle protest.

"I will go with you to Mrs. Miller's, if you are determined to do this insane thing," he said, with a sort of roughness. "You can't go running around town alone. It's going to rain in a minute."

She yielded docilely, because it was not her way to combat immaterial actions and Cleve was not deceived by this. He knew that Antonia, when seeming most gentle, could be most adamant, and for a time they went on in silence while he searched his mind for an argument to bring against her purpose. . . . The rising wind was in

their faces and the dust, blowing in clouds before it, enveloped them in a bewildering summer fury. The smell of rain was keen in the air and the branches of the trees lashed each other impotently. . . . In the houses along the way people were shutting windows, fastening awnings, and talking to one another in shrill, high, nervous voices as though the storm were a menace they must unite against. But Cleve and Antonia gave no attention to what was so imminent and had destroyed the peace of the summer night. Even when the rain, quick and cold, dashed a shower of fine spray in their faces, they merely lowered their heads and went doggedly on. They were nearly to their destination, the house on Thelma Avenue, where Cleve himself had once lived, when he began to speak in a sort of furious haste.

"You can't do this, Antonia! You must go back home. It's the most insane thing I ever heard of. This is all Withrow's doing; if he hadn't encouraged you in that notion of yours you wouldn't be here to-night. Come now, let's go back. I'll talk to the Judge myself. He'll listen to me—I'll explain everything—"

They stopped at a corner. The tall brown house which was Antonia's objective, loomed in the middle of a block of insignificant, pigmy cottages where the poor of Cresston lived. The rain was coming down in earnest now, and in an instant the heat of summer was gone and they were wrapped in wetness and chill. As Cleve faced the way they had come, Antonia made as determined a movement toward the poverty of the unfamiliar street. . . .

"I am not going back," she said steadily. "It is not Peter's fault. . . . You do not understand. . . . I cannot think why—"

What she wanted to say was that Cleve of all men should

be the one to understand her motives and to applaud them. He had himself struggled against insuperable obstacles and had succeeded. He had felt the call of ambition through poverty and isolation, and by force of will brought himself through the mass of inconceivable hardship and doubt that would have crushed a lesser man. In this she knew that she had helped him a little years ago by her belief and praise, as he should have helped her now. But she could not put any of this in words; it lay too deep within her heart. Instead, she found excuses for him; she tried to take the suitcase from his hand but he resisted, continuing his low-voiced protests. . . . "You must go back, Antonia. . . ."

But at last he saw this was futile. . . . "Very well. If you are determined—" he said in an exasperated tone and with the air of abandoning himself to what was inexplicable. He walked with her to Mrs. Miller's door, astonished to find himself standing on a spot he had thought of as belonging to a part of his existence that was completely banished.

"You will think differently of this in the morning," he said while they stood together on the porch, waiting for Mrs. Miller to answer the jangling bell. "You'll go back home to-morrow, Antonia. Promise me that you will."

But she shook her head. "I don't think so. You see, my father doesn't want me back unless I change into something which I am not and have never been—or pretend to change, which would be as bad."

There was no time to say more, for they saw Mrs. Miller coming along the hall, her face wearing a suspicious expression, as if the motives of persons ringing a doorbell during a storm might well be looked into. When she recognized her visitors she concealed her surprise and interest admirably beneath a professionally warm welcome and soon

Antonia was telling Cleve good-by and thanking him for coming with her. . . . It was raining tumultuously by this time and he had come inside to telephone for a taxi. . . .

It had all become commonplace and ordinary; there was no longer a hint of the conflict forcing its way to their mute lips—destroying reserve and threatening disaster to carefully built plans.

They stood inside the door with Mrs. Miller, a nervous chaperone, hovering in the background, and the certainty that other eyes were lurking behind doors, confirming what eager ears listened to, increased the irritation which had been growing in Cleve until the time he was forced to wait became interminable. Fleeting thoughts of Rose began to recur. His appointment with her; the lateness of the hour; the difficulty of getting to the Club . . . missing this opportunity long waited for, of being with her. . . .

Finally the lights of the taxi, shining palely through the rain, came creeping to Mrs. Miller's respectable door, and with this the end of his self-imposed duty. He was almost audibly impatient to have done with it; the stubbornness which rejected advice and the pleasant doctrine of convention. . . . He muttered a hasty good-by to Antonia and the landlady, and ran lightly down the steps. He felt himself pleasantly cleansed of responsibility. The quick slam of the taxi door thrust him from this mild adventure into the exciting promise of the delightful world which offered its favors with full hands.

The slanting rain, sweeping across the narrow porch, threatened Mrs. Miller's new hall carpet. She closed the door in agitation and addressed Antonia Christy, her newest boarder, with a tight smile. . . .

"These young men! Don't I know them after eighteen years? What do they care for ruining other folks' furni-

ture and carpets—though I must say Mr. Harkness is one of the neatest I have ever seen. It isn't like him to leave a door open in the pouring rain. But any one can see that he isn't himself. . . . I was never more surprised in my life than when I saw him walk in here with you. . . . I thought you folks— Now if you'll walk right up, Miss Antonia. Maggie finished your room at five o'clock and I hope you'll find everything to suit, but coming straight from your own home you may be a little strange at first. . . . I always say 'Life is what you make it in a boarding house' . . . not original, of course, but partly my own idea. . . ."

This was Mrs. Miller's habitual greeting to newcomers and in such philosophy was concealed a cunning excuse for all shortcomings of her ménage, but Antonia did not know this and it sounded friendly and just a little reminiscent of her mother to her heart, already immeasurably lonely for what yesterday had been the high wall that sheltered her girlhood from the sun of life.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. DUPAGNY, in a frock totally unrelated to Cresston, was languidly following a highly specialized partner around the dancing floor when she caught sight of Cleve just inside the door, his smooth head brushed to a cap of dull gold, lifted above the heads of other men as his restless eyes sought, without seeming to seek, her own figure among the dancers that filled the floor.

A minute before her heart had been tortured by misgivings: had he ceased to care? Had he ever cared? Or, hearing the lash of the storm outside, she wondered in tormented uncertainty if there could have been an accident. The unpaved road to the Clubhouse, unfinished like so many of the town's abortive efforts to grow at a leap to a young metropolis, was a quagmire by this time, a thin lake of slippery mud and water; he might be lying out there somewhere, injured, unable to come to her. . . . With the fatalism of women where their hearts are concerned, her mind leaped at once to disaster. As her slippered feet followed the rhythm of the music, she longed to run heedlessly through the rain and find him, wherever he was.

Yet when she looked up and saw him her face did not change and the faint smile on her lips remained undeepened. Miss Ethel Plumey, watching from an unsought corner, could see no subtle alteration in the beautiful face of her friend.

The dance neared its close, took heart with a throbbing

recurrence of its wistful theme, lingered upon this sporadically, and ended, leaving Rose and her partner near the door where Cleve waited, gloomily marooned in a sea of bared shoulders and smooth, glistening coiffures. This required a bit of clever manipulation on the part of Rose and was unsuspected by her companion, though Miss Plumey observed it and smiled cynically. The smile sharpened as she witnessed with enjoyment and interest the meeting of the two who engaged while they tormented her attention.

The doorways were surging with people who were looking for air and ices, and Cleve did not see Rose until she was close beside him. And then he sensed her presence, rather than beheld it, by the intangible, illusory cords that draw lovers to one another. He had been thinking of her, secure in the belief that his thoughts were hidden things, and when he looked up and saw her there, he forgot for once his mentor, the world, in the poignant and delicious shock of his discovery.

And Rose, in the delight of seeing him so close, when an hour ago he had been far away, lifted the curtain of her eyes long enough for him to glimpse her heart. They moved toward each other involuntarily, forgetting, in the thrill of encounter, the hundred eyes upon them; the hundred tongues ready to seize upon their weakness and betray.

Nina Tyson and Willetta Porter, with whom the Dupagnys had dined that night, happened to be standing side by side and the Tyson woman, who always saw a little more than really happened, said spitefully behind her fan:

"Really, Rose should be a little careful . . . a boy like that! He looks as though he would eat her. . . . And she—"

"—as though she would enjoy being eaten," Willetta Porter finished, forgetting duty to a guest in the pleasure

of winning a smile from the other woman who was notoriously clever. Their eyes met in a look of understanding. They were not particular friends, or had not been until then, but they laughed together amicably, satisfied that Rose would provide them with material for mirth in a future that was full of possibilities.

The two in question moved lingeringly through the crowded room, apparently without object, but secure in the knowledge that opportunity for untrammeled speech would be given them presently. After the first long look they carefully avoided each other's eyes, but, in spite of this restraint or because of it, they found their shoulders touching in faint and thrilling contact again and again. . . .

The music began again and they danced until, in the uproar of the jazz chorus, a curtained archway allowed them to slip through to the quiet of a little room which had grown familiar to both in the past weeks. Believing themselves safe, they clung to each other in the attitude of the dance for a long silent moment that was punctuated by the throb of the distant instruments, softened to melody by the thick hangings.

"You are so late," Rose complained, with a little shivery laugh, releasing herself.

"A sort of conspiracy," Cleve jested, trying to keep in check his rising excitement. He looked at her as though seeing her for the first time. "How beautiful you are to-night, Rose!" he said, in a sort of awe.

She glanced down at her gown with the gratified smile of a flattered woman. The flame colored wisp of chiffon had cost an hour of humiliating tears and pleading. Its price, reluctantly given, had robbed Laurence Dupagny's creditors of a minimum payment on their bills. She had put it on with bitterness, hating the mean subterfuges of

her life, for it had also robbed her of some of the aloofness which she cherished and used unscrupulously to keep her husband at a distance; but now she loved the gown again and saw its beauty with triumphant eyes.

They sat on the frivolous little cane settee and said all the unmeaning things that people say when their hearts are full of what may not be spoken, and, beyond the partition, the orchestra blared and friends laughed and danced in the intimacy of the sheltered place. And through all this there was a dull, booming sound—the rain beating continuously upon the wide flat roof.

But presently the end came to the idle things they had been saying. It was like the sands of an hour glass pouring into vacancy without replenishment. Silence followed. Listening, their feet might have been heard approaching the barrier that until now had kept them apart. She looked up to find him staring at her in a sort of wonderment, as though his eyes saw something beyond the present which filled him with incredulity. His arms closed around her in an embrace that was foreign to what they had known. It was inevitable.

When he released her he stepped back amazed at his own temerity. He thought: "Can this be I?" Rose to him had been like a star and now he found her in his hand.

Rose herself was no less overwhelmed, but she asked herself if she were mad. Her emotions, swift and tumultuous, had thrust her into his arms, but her mind, clinging to reason, rebelled against the appalling step to which this yielding had led her. She struggled determinedly against the power that was becoming stronger than her will and which she recognized as an enemy to her peace. "I must not give way," she said desperately to herself. . . . "I know men. I know how it will end. I must suffer, no matter what

course I take." But this cynical thought did not serve her, for, as if he had been warned of the conflict in her soul, Cleve drew her to him again, jealously guarding this miraculous possession against the possibility of withdrawal.

"Kiss me, Rose," he whispered, and, without waiting for her consent, kissed her again and again, until, surrendering, she closed her ears to the warning of the voices that called to her until she willed them to be silent.

A slim white hand slipped through the heavy curtains. Willetta Porter's bright dark eyes saw everything, but her ingenuous face disclosed nothing of this knowledge when she joined them full of pretty scolding.

"Rose, Rose, why have you forgotten that old Mrs. Tobin is here to-night! And if you wanted to slip off unseen, why wear a red gown? Every one has missed you—even your husband! I heard him asking for you ten minutes ago. Come back with me. Cleve, you look as though you needed a cigarette. Do have one of mine, and smoke it before you follow us."

They were astonished to find how long a time had elapsed since impulse stranded them in the little room. Rose looked at her friend dreamily. It was as though the night had passed and morning was smiling through the windows. She looked at Cleve and smiled. The other woman had obtruded her presence in the room, but she could not break the current of thought that flowed between them like a turbulent river.

Cleve's hand shook as he took the cigarette Willetta offered. He did this subconsciously for the idea of smoking a woman's cigarette would have seemed ridiculous to him, and after the tiny thing was in his hand he stared at it stupidly, finally crumbling it in his fingers. He hardly knew when the two women left the room—Willetta nervously

alert, small and dominant, with her arm drawn lightly through Rose's. And Rose herself, drooping slightly in the flame colored gown, with something fragile and young suddenly come to life about her, as though beneath the material aspect of her beauty, her spirit was pleading dumbly for help.

But this inertia left him as they vanished and he thought impatiently of Willetta and her interference. He wanted Rose again and in his triumphant elation would have called to her to return had that been possible. Her weakness made no appeal to him. He was not sorry for her. She was his.

There was another exit to the little room and he wandered vaguely through this, finding himself after awhile in a place which represented a Middle West architect's conception of a Dutch taproom. It was fairly well done, only the men sitting around the bare oak trenchers were drinking anything but beer, and the delicate smoke that veiled the ceiling was not from honest pipes.

Cleve's eyes, obsessed by the image of Rose, sought and found Laurence Dupagny, the center of a little group of bored listeners to whom he was explaining his latest plan for re-creating Cresston. In spite of himself the younger man, himself unnoticed, drew nearer to the group. There was an inward urge to hear the speaker's voice, to watch his face. Dupagny had become suddenly imbued with tremendous importance, a tantalizing mystery. This middle-aged, harassed man, with tired eyes and eager, persuasive voice, was an important factor in what was to come. Rose belonged to him. In some way he had won her. There was no explanation of how this miracle had come about but it was true. Cleve stood so closely at Dupagny's elbow that he could have touched him and he waited there, com-

pelled by this secret speculation that increased enormously his own self-esteem.

He was not jealous of Dupagny. Whatever the legerdemain may have been which made Rose this man's wife, love had played no part in it—he was sure of that. His instincts plumbed to the heart of this union and surveyed unmolested the tie that bound the two, and Dupagny, the husband, became a negligible quantity with the certainty that Rose had never loved him.

Dupagny's tone was slightly thickened. "I tell you, frensh, Creshton is in b'ginning of great building era, an' thish is th' time t'get in—in—" He had been drinking.

Cleve experienced a sensation of disgust. He had a fastidious distaste for the effects of liquor and to his viewpoint such indulgence meant moral suicide. One of the elements of his popularity with women was his freedom from the weakness which so often betrays the cloven hoof. No one had ever seen him take more than a polite cocktail and in this abstinence he preserved his personal mystery and with it the interest of his friends. He had a tolerant contempt for such weakness in other men, but to see Laurence Dupagny in this condition affected him almost as a personal affront. He beheld a swift vision of Rose alone with this disgusting brute, trying to pacify him, persuading him to be silent, to sleep. "The fool!" he said, behind his lips.

Then he was attracted by a laugh. Peter Withrow was at the table and it was to him that the promoter had been speaking. Peter was drinking, too; had been drinking all through the evening, as was evidenced by the glitter in his eyes and the sardonic laughter that always left his hearers with a faint chill. When he saw Cleve standing beside

Dupagny with the sneer on his mouth the sight seemed to give him a peculiar satisfaction.

"Will you join us?" he invited, reading the other's thoughts with uncanny prescience, pressing his guard with rapier like raillery. "Have you heard our friend Dupagny describe the advantages of the sites he has for sale. . . . And these may be yours if you have the price. Or if you are clever enough to get what you want without paying!"

Cleve saw that Peter wished to insult him. In the mixed state of his emotions there was no place for conflict with this outsider. When Peter was in his cups he always showed a peculiar bitterness toward those who were free from his own failing and Cleve generously waived resentment whenever he was chosen as the mark for the other's rudeness. But to-night, because he had been shaken from his usual phlegmatic calm, the slurring words affected him with a surprising up flame of anger. He would not trust himself to reply and was turning away when he was arrested by an unexpected protest from Dupagny. The promoter, taking swift offense at what he chose to apply to himself, got on his feet with some difficulty and thrust his haggard face toward Peter Withrow in a pitiful attempt at dignity.

"You mean something by that!" he stammered. "What d'ye mean by 'not paying'?"

There was going to be a quarrel—a drunken brawl. Friends would interfere; the steward might be called. It was all repulsive—unnecessary.

Cleve continued on his way to the ball room followed by the medley of voices from the taproom which explained the unexplainable. The trivial scene just witnessed was like a complete reassurance to any doubt he might have had of

his own future. The men in the group he left were representative men of Cresston—all were successful, all had made money in one way or another; they had flourishing businesses and held responsible positions, yet they lent their bodies and brains to such practices as this. He felt immeasurably superior to each of them. He had come away cool of head and master of himself while they brawled among themselves, ridiculous in their mock heroics. With this strength latent and controlled within him, what might he not accomplish? He recognized his own egotism but as friend and ally. He saw nothing in its swift growth that was not commendable.

There had been more than enough time to smoke Willetta's minute cigarette, and when he reached the ball room he saw Rose one-stepping in some man's arms, her eyes restlessly seeking him through the crowd as his had searched for her in the beginning of the evening. "She loves me!" he thought exultantly and forgot the impending quarrel in the taproom.

It was difficult to get a dance with her. The secret flame of her soul seemed to draw men to her like moths to a candle. She had always been too discreet to allow herself too great popularity, but to-night she was too languid and too happy to prevent men from crowding about her.

When Cleve had a moment he whispered, "You must not let other men make love to you. I can't stand it."

Rose laughed happily. She wanted to explain that the flattery of other lips and the touch of other arms about her meant nothing. These people were merely in the background of her happiness, like chairs and tables furnishing a room. There were so many things she wanted to say to him, but there never seemed to be an opportunity. The others, crowding close, kept them apart yet left their spirits

free to mingle in contactless voids, unsatisfying, filled with wistfulness.

Ethel Plumey, draped in a home-made evening coat, touched Rose's bare arm.

"Mamma wants to know if you will come home with us. We have the carriage, you know. Mamma is always glad in weather like this that we have the carriage instead of a car. It's so much safer."

"Why—why—" Rose came a little way from her abstraction, glancing around the fast emptying room. "Why—" She returned to Miss Plumey's kindly offer. "We came with Willetta,—Mrs. Porter. Laurence will expect to return with her."

"Willetta left twenty minutes ago," Ethel informed her with a giggle, enjoying the consternation she created. "She took the Tysons in her car. Mrs. Tyson left her own machine in the Club garage. She didn't want the mud, she said, for it takes her man a half day to clean it. Willetta asked me to offer you a place."

The lifting of an eyebrow! Rose had seen it a hundred times. Her swift instinct, leaping from the languor of her own smothering, self-centered thoughts, sensed danger. Willetta had seen them together in the little room. What had she thought or suspected? The friend who had confided in her a hundred petty indiscretions was about to turn her own face away at the hint of an indiscretion in Rose.

But the next moment she rejected this faint panic as absurd and childish. Willetta meant nothing of the sort. She was a notorious little favor seeker and the Tysons were powerful and important. To place them under the obligation of saving the polish on their car at the expense of her own was like Willetta. She never missed a small advantage like that, and to-morrow she would come running

in, cleverly mimicking selfish old Mrs. Tyson, and retailing all the gossip that had been garnered during the ride. Rose smiled cynically, reflecting that the part that concerned herself would be the only part kept back. She would be sure to occupy a portion of their conversation, but they would be careful not to let her know.

She rejected the Plumey offer with a careless laugh. She knew how much her slight humiliation was enjoyed and she was in no mind to shut herself and her high happiness into the close atmosphere of the antediluvian coupé with Mrs. Plumey and Ethel.

"Thank your mother for me, but it would be too much, I am afraid," she said sweetly. "Laurence will manage something, surely."

Miss Plumey sent a malevolent glance toward the taproom door and Rose might have grasped the meaning of this if her mind had been following the small signs that were everywhere. "You will see," predicted her friend. "You had better come with us."

She was right. The room thinned perceptibly. People were going; rushing about hunting for mackintoshes, bewailing the state of the roads, abusing the weather. They forgot how happy they had been an hour ago.

The sky, black and fathomless, poured unceasingly. Doubting chauffeurs reluctantly brought machines to the door and people who had no chauffeurs prepared to drive themselves, expecting to land in a ditch at every turn. The Plumeys departed comfortably in their old-fashioned coupé and the lights, shining on the glistening rumps of the horses, helped them to a sense of security. Only a few were left in the ballroom. A waiter hovered near the door, longing to turn off the lights and end it all.

"What can be keeping Lorry?" said Rose nervously to

Cleve who was beside her. For the moment she was back in her shell of convention. It became intensely important that she should leave the Club as other women left it—under her husband's protection.

She was answered. Laurence Dupagny, flanked by two dissuasive friends, appeared in the doorway of the Dutch room. Over their shoulders could be seen other faces, amused, disgusted, apprehensive, malicious. A waiter, chalky white, with his napkin over his arm, fluttered weakly beyond them all. Rose watched stonily. She knew at once that this meant humiliation for her, if not worse.

"Don't speak to him," whispered Cleve, struck by the probability of imminent distress for her, "let me take you away."

"No, no," she answered mechanically, "I am not afraid. He will injure himself, not me." She was thinking of Dupagny's plans on which so much depended. He would ruin everything by this exhibition.

Dupagny stood looking around the room, which was now empty except for the groups of which Rose and himself were the centers. He was changed unbelievably by his deplorable condition. His meticulous neatness was gone and with it the careful guard habit kept upon his features. His underlip hung heavily and pendulous; his eyes, blood-shot, roved unceasingly. He displayed the futile anger of a thwarted man. His wandering gaze at last encountered Rose in her flame colored gown and his face lighted into a dull glow.

"Ah, there she is," he stammered. "My wife. Lemme intr'duce m'wife. Mos' beautifu' woman, but cold,—dam' cold—"

Some one dragged him away. There was a sort of subdued scuffle,—a tangle of black clad shoulders and Peter

appeared where Dupagny had been. His tie was awry and a lock of hair fell over his forehead, but he spoke evenly enough.

"Excuse—" he said to Rose. "He didn't mean to say that."

"Take me away," she cried to Cleve, in a stifled tone. He seemed to be her only friend. "Let me go now—now—"

In the car she leaned against him in the thick wet darkness. Her body, sweet and supple through all its soft wrapping, was warm as though the flame colored dress was a thing of fire.

They were shut away by the curtains and the swift movement from a world that no longer concerned them. Through the streaming windshield the befogged lamps picked out a wavering path along the slipping road.

They did not talk. There was so much to say between them that they said nothing at all. They could not trust themselves to speak in this strange intimate isolation.

But at last they came into the town. Rose leaned weakly against him. Soon they must part.

The wheels rolled upon asphalt. Two dull, submerged lights, like sentinels, leaped suddenly from the darkness, confronting them as they stopped. Rose, leaning forward to peer through the obscured window, exclaimed in confusion:

"This is not my house!"

She recognized the lamps which were posted on either side of a wide doorway. "Why—" she stammered and sunk back in her place, trembling. The car was standing before the Sheridan Building.

His arm trembled with her as he put it around her shoulders. He was overwhelmed with emotion. He had the sensation of one who looks too long and too closely at the sun. He was dazzled, bewildered.

But in the midst of this ecstasy the secret force within which had so often thwarted him in moments of abandonment, asserted itself and sent his thoughts racing far afield. It was impossible for him to lose himself completely to any one emotion. Burning with passion for Rose, his mind turned in disdain from this magnificent adventure, searched for and found Antonia, pure and aloof, sleeping not far away upon a narrow bed, under a stranger's roof.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT which is so devastating to oneself may be infinitesimal to the rest of the world.

This simple truth if applied to their own domestic cataclysm would have been an immense solace to the Christys if put in practice when their daughter left home to begin a life of her own, guided by her own hopes and plans.

Unlike the ostrich they believed themselves to be the center of a storm of censure, pity and speculation. Because they had lived in Cresston longer than other people, they cherished the illusion that the eyes of their little world were fastened upon them.

But this was not so. Their poverty obscured them. The thing they thought their misfortune was really a cloak to shield them if they had only seen it in that light. To the avid town, intent upon its own concerns, money-getting, gossiping, straining to keep up appearances,—the matter of Antonia Christy was of no importance. The town had looked upon more poignant tragedies unmoved. To claim its attention Antonia would have to emerge from the gentle shell in which her real self was hidden and shock and startle. In her present disguise she was merely a shabby girl who had joined the ranks of the home-goers at five o'clock every afternoon. She would have to do more than that to make herself and her family notorious. That she had set up her own gods apart from her father meant nothing at all.

Just as the sorry jest that elected Roscoe Christy to his

petty office was forgotten as soon as accomplished, so was Antonia's flutter toward the blue sky of freedom unseen.

No one realized this sooner than Antonia herself. In an astonishingly short time the novelty of her new life and its duties disappeared; it became habitual, then commonplace. Swiftly the twenty years of her past receded and the dull and petty routine of the present succeeded the dull and petty routine which had come before. In her new occupation she found none of the brilliant excitement she had predicted for herself, but in spite of this she was not flagrantly disappointed. Her existence was like waking from an opalescent dream to find that life had not changed materially, if it had in the abstract.

One of her early realizations caused her to blush shamefacedly when she recalled her somewhat heroic threat to find another position if Peter Withrow refused her a chance in his office. Within a week she knew that this would have been no easy matter. And Peter knew it, too. Cleve had been quite right when he said that they could have had a trained secretary in place of Antonia. She worked carefully but she had none of the meretricious smartness of the young persons schooled en masse to carry on the routine of an office. She was learning to use the typewriter, but, as Cleve pointed out to his partner, why should their office serve as preparatory school? Cleve had no sympathy for beginners, though he should have had much. He wanted his machinery to run smoothly in oiled perfection. He could have reproved a stranger for technical errors in a calm, cold voice but he could not reprove Antonia.

She offered to resign on the third day when she committed a glaring error which would take hours of careful work to eradicate. "I am only in the way," she said to Peter, with tears of mortification just beyond her dark eyes.

But Peter poohpoohed such a radical measure of correction. He pointed out the trite but comforting truism that "everybody makes mistakes sometimes." Antonia made them but they could be mended, and, after all, he reminded her, copying papers was not the real reason of her service with him. There was a deeper purpose than that. It reassured them both to remember that all clever lawyers wrote remarkably bad letters! In the end Antonia's mistakes seemed to augur some future triumph of which the present awkwardness in immaterial trifles was but the forerunner.

Antonia told herself that she was happy and believed it. She had the things she had wanted since she was a little girl: time and solitude for reading and study; the smell of leather bound books; an environment of grave essentials that helped the blossoming of her mind.

But she was not happy. She knew this when she returned in the evening to Mrs. Miller's boarding-house on Thelma Avenue which had become her home. When she entered the chill neatness of her third floor room, furnished in light pine and white painted iron, where the chairs were always replaced at a certain angle and two red-bordered towels fresh from the mangle confronted her from the rack above the washstand, this vague unhappiness crept into her heart and settled there.

One evening she found her mother waiting for her when she entered her room.

"I just had to come, Antonia," said Mrs. Christy tremulously. She was rocking back and forth in a monotonous, measured motion which continued after the greeting that passed between them, and she did not remove her hat, a dull brown straw, which gave to her visit a casual air. Mrs. Christy was not a stranger at Mrs. Miller's house, but not once during Antonia's stay had she abandoned her air of

transiency. Her manner said plainly that in her opinion there was no permanence to the arrangement, and while she retained her garments of formality it could not be supposed that she countenanced it in any way.

Antonia met her mother with sweet tranquillity. She was prepared for reproaches and all the old arguments, for Mrs. Christy never failed to voice plaintively her distress at her daughter's unprecedented desertion, and this visit was in no way different from others. When the girl had put her hat and little purse aside and the two were seated opposite one another, the plea with which she was becoming increasingly familiar began.

"Why are you so hard, child? I'm sure I never dreamed when you were a little thing, so solemn and good, that you would grow up so unlike other girls. It doesn't seem right, somehow, that I should have a daughter so different. I had a letter from your Aunt Eugenia to-day. They've heard about this in Plainville already. She was very sympathetic, but she took pains to tell me all about your cousin May's wedding and her clothes and everything. She put stress on what a comfort May had been. She's marrying the doctor. There always was a doctor in the Saltwell family and May being married to one gives her a sort of importance. Eugenia seemed to be very proud!"

Mrs. Christy paused to touch her reddened eyelids with a frail little handkerchief. "Pity me," she seemed to add in an aside, "my daughter has failed. She has brought no honor to her family by marriage or otherwise."

Antonia understood this. "I am sorry, mother," she said gently and tried to turn the conversation to other channels. "How is Donnie," she asked, "and—father?"

But this led to deeper waters. Mrs. Christy's depression increased. "Donnie is unchanged," she said, as though

years instead of weeks had passed. "But your father—Antonia, I have no wish to distress you, but I cannot help but feel that you have hurt your father perhaps more than —other disappointments in the past. He does not say anything—really, he talks less than ever; sometimes I am fairly driven wild for the need of some one to speak to. The house is like a tomb. He murmurs things to himself and when I ask him to repeat what he is saying, he simply stares at me as though I had not spoken. It is very trying, really it is, my dear."

She began to weep again, very gently and delicately into her pocket handkerchief, and Antonia wished that she could weep a little for company, but she did not possess her mother's facile tears.

"Poor mother," she said tenderly, but without admitting that she was in any way to blame. To herself she was saying wearily. "Am I never to hear the end of this? Why won't they understand and stop worrying over me? I am no longer a child to come and go as I am told." She dared not voice this protest but she added aloud in an absent tone, "It is very hard on you, poor mother."

Mrs. Christy brightened visibly at the first compassionate word.

"Oh, dear, no," she said briskly, putting the handkerchief resolutely away and patting her hair, "you must not say that, child. I am quite accustomed to your father's little ways. I should not like him to be loquacious, really, I shouldn't. It is only that we both miss you—" she went on wistfully. "In different ways—we miss you."

Antonia was not so far from tears as she had believed herself. Her mother's swift reactions under the stimulus of sympathy always affected her as peculiarly pathetic, but she resented this emotion and refused to yield to it. She dreaded

the effect of these typically feminine emotions upon her resolutions. "Let us speak of something else," she said, almost harshly.

Mrs. Christy knew that she had displeased her daughter and responded with a desperate effort to be casual.

"And how are you getting on? Is Peter Withrow kind and considerate? I am sure he would be, for if ever there was a gentleman born it is his father. I hope—I pray that he has remembered that, and that you are a lady, as well, even though you are employed there. I refer to his—er habits. If he should appear before you when he is having one of those dreadful relapses into *drink*,—what would become of you, my child?"

Antonia regarded her mother contemplatively. She was always marveling at the determined attitude which Mrs. Christy took toward her youth. Because of it she must be protected from knowledge and experience; kept in ignorance, shielded from all that was ugly and broadening. She had never seen Peter in the sorry state referred to as a "relapse;" but she had seen others and she knew what it must be like. She felt only pity for such unfortunates and she tried to make her mother understand.

"If Peter were very ill," she said thoughtfully, "you would hurry to him. If he took poison,—had a dreadful accident—it would be the same. You would even allow me to go to him. Why, then, should I be afraid and avoid him under other conditions when he is equally to be pitied and cared for?" But she saw at once the hopelessness of argument and became silent.

"Thank Heaven," said Mrs. Christy in a heartfelt tone, "that in a little while there will be no more of the vile stuff, —but—" she added with gloomy afterthought, "doubtless he will only have to go to his own bar instead of another's.

Unfortunately, he has the money to buy anything. You can't think what a relief it is to me to know that Cleve Harkness is in the same office. Your father dislikes him—almost without reason, I should say—but it is well known that he has no bad habits. He is to be commended for that, as well as for his studious career. What a pity his father is such an old rogue . . . some one was telling me that he stole—actually stole, the furniture from a war widow's house,—that is, he gave her only half of what it would have been if there had been no war and everything doubled in price. Every one says that young Cleve will go far. To know that he is there, prepared to stand between you and anything disagreeable, is something, at least."

Far below, in the cavernous front hall, a harsh toned bell rang distantly. Simultaneously through the house, doors opened and shut hurriedly; feet descended the stairs. There was a faint odor, indescribable but distinct, which seemed to be a part of the atmosphere. It was the important hour of the day and the boarding-house, which, an hour before, had been a place of weariness and solitary returning, took on an air of gay comradeship, even of fashion. Through the open transom, voices could be heard greeting other voices pleasantly, as though the day which approached its end was just beginning.

Antonia stood up, touching her hair lightly with her fingertips. Lateness to meals was a fault not readily overlooked in Mrs. Miller's house.

"Will you—will you—stay to dinner, mother?" she asked entreatingly, but Mrs. Christy, also galvanized by the summons, was preparing hastily for departure.

"Thank you, Antonia, but that is impossible, as you know," she returned icily. In some obscure way the invitation offended and humiliated her. She could visualize

nothing less possible than herself as an invited guest in Mrs. Miller's basement dining-room. "Thank you," she said again, as though speaking to a stranger. "I must be going now. The time has slipped by—"

At the door she forgot this momentary pose or it eluded her. She put her arm around Antonia's shoulder and kissed the soft petaled cheek with a sort of timid fierceness. Once that cheek had been never far from her lips, but now in a little while it had grown strange—almost remote. Her love reached out to reclaim it.

"You are so hard!" she cried again. "But it is only because you do not know! Young people are always hard—I tell him that when he will listen. But when you are old and after you have suffered things, you forgive more easily, and you can forget. He wants to forgive you, if you will come back."

"Forgive me!" repeated Antonia. Though she returned the caress warmly she stood apart when it was over—"—For what? What have I done that I should be forgiven?" Her tone was cold with offense.

In the hall downstairs they encountered Mrs. Miller in beaded crêpe de chine and smiling affably, though with a hard stratum beneath her gracious manner. It was Saturday night and the landlady was collecting the weekly tribute from her guests. She advertised the fact that while she had their interests at heart, the house was a matter of business.

At sight of her Mrs. Christy's bonnet seemed to grow more firmly on her head and her body stiffened. She had once known Mrs. Miller very well indeed, but now an indefinable barrier suddenly established itself between the two ladies. This was encouraged to grow to startling dimensions by the landlady's cordiality which carried its own sting.

"So you have been visiting our dear girl again," she exclaimed vivaciously as she accepted the slim offering that Antonia put in her hand. There was a lull in the procession of tribute givers and she took the opportunity to prove to Mrs. Christy's doubting face that young persons bereft of their own homes lost nothing in coming to hers. She slipped an affectionate arm around Antonia's waist.

"This dear one is growing to be my very own," she smiled. "I want her to call me Aunt Mollie, as the others do, but she is too shy. And sometimes I am glad, for I don't want her to be quite like them. I am her borrowed mother, you see, and 'Aunt Mollie,' though it is a dear name, would not quite do."

Mrs. Christy's vague animosity solidified at a word into a definite sensation. Antonia's "borrowed mother," indeed! She was jealous with the swift passion and unreasoning prejudice of a mother whose child is claimed by a stranger. Her lips tightened and two high spots of color sprang out upon her cheek bones.

"I must go now," she said to Antonia, who had seen nothing of this and was in ignorance of her mother's resentment as she was of Mrs. Miller's triumphant look. "You must go to your dinner now." She fumbled in her large moire handbag and produced finally a small parcel, wrapped in stiff white paper. "Here is some jelly, child," she said, giving the package to Antonia and disregarding Mrs. Miller's indignant stare. "I can't bear to think of your eating store sweets. You will appreciate it," she added in an aside, "it is from the yellow plums."

"Dinner is being served, Miss Christy," said Mrs. Miller sharply. "The butler hates to go back to the first when he's on the third. If you wouldn't mind stepping down now—"

CHAPTER XIV

BEFORE Antonia uprooted her little life and transplanted it to the soil where she believed it would thrive better, she had endeavored with all the earnestness of twenty to banish from her mind every thought and memory of Cleve Harkness except in the negligible position he would occupy in her future. To her pristine clarity of purpose it would have been intolerable to place herself by her own effort near him. She found it easy to put this resolution into effect, for from the first morning Cleve himself assumed an attitude of detachment that sent her pride to arms.

He resented her presence in the office and was at no pains to conceal this aversion. With all the new sophistication and extraordinary learning with which his brain was crammed, there were times when he relapsed into boyishness, usually of a sulky and selfish trend, and it was in such moments that he was most attractive to women who could not see the real meaning of his silence. They loved to discover the source of his dissatisfaction and cure it with tenderness and indulgence.

He showed this angle of his nature to Antonia, when, after a week of cool good mornings, he stopped beside her desk and pretended to be interested in a paper she was copying.

"You are doing it all wrong," he said in a dissatisfied tone. "Why do you try to do this, Antonia? It's wretched drudgery and you are unsuited to it."

He glanced at her face, flawless against its unsympathetic background. He wanted to say that she was too pretty for such prison fare, but he had never spoken in that vein to her. He could not find a beginning.

Antonia, who was more direct, seized the opportunity to say what was continually in her mind, and which hurt her with a dull, persistent pain.

"You do not want me here," she said, lifting her eyes from her work with a sort of defiance reminiscent of childhood. "If you could, you would make Peter send me away."

"I would," he admitted with frankness, and added, "he's only keeping you on because of my objection. He wants to prove his seniority."

His reward was to see a slow flush creep over her neck and into her soft cheeks. He exulted; he had made her angry. "You should take a business course if you are determined to do work like this," he finished, delighting in her confusion. But he was not really cruel and his rudeness was the rudeness of childhood familiarity not too long past. "It's because I'm so fond of you, Antonia," he said in a different voice, "and I know how this hurts your father. He blames me for some of it though I've done my best to show him it was not my fault. When I meet him in the street he refuses to recognize me. Of all the stubborn girls! Don't you see how uncomfortable you are making everybody? If people knew you had quarreled with your family because you want to make a lawyer out of yourself, when there are far too many lawyers already, it would make an ugly situation if it didn't make a ridiculous one."

People! Antonia permitted her lip to curl a little. At that moment she felt only contempt in place of her old tenderness for him. He was influenced by the point of view

of others, not a real interest in herself and her welfare. For a second she had the inner vision that saw him stripped of charm and without the misleading harmonies of voice and smile that made him what he was. She took up a fresh sheet and put it in the machine with a look that dismissed him.

"I am sorry," she said in a changed voice, "but you are quite wrong. No one is interested in me."

He turned angrily away, followed by the slow clicking of the machine.

"How self-willed women can be," he thought. What tenacity was concealed beneath the slim shell of Antonia Christy's body and beyond her gentle face. When a woman wants anything how she holds on until she gets it!

This led naturally to thoughts of Rose. "But she is not like other women!" he consoled himself.

To think of her made him restless and impatient with the duties of the day. There were a number of things that waited for his attention. He longed to be finished with them, free to go out of the room and shut business behind the closed door. But his conscience would not permit this exit until everything was in order. He wondered where his old joy in work had gone. Before Rose Dupagny came into his life no day had been long enough. When he lived at the Thelma Avenue boarding-house and wore thin blue serge ready-mades, even the days were not enough. There were the nights—glorious hours stolen from sleep, crowded with knowledge.

But that belonged to another part of his life—like childhood. He had outgrown study and come into accomplishment; there were times when, with his superior insight into men and conditions, he felt with superb elation that he held Cresston and its affairs between his thumb and finger, to

mold as he desired. There was but one thing between himself and these aims—money.

Cleve was familiar with the national ideal of the struggling young man reaching fame in his shirtsleeves, but he had no desire to make this his own. When his time came—as he was so sure it would come—he did not plan to ride into success on the shoulders of the populace; it suited him far better to arrive in a limousine. The hysterical bravos of the poor for one of their own kind did not deceive him. He knew that to retain such loyalty he must retain the character of poverty and he vastly preferred the respect, even if tinctured with envy and hatred, which belongs to affluence.

But where was he to get the money? This was the weak link that worried him.

The practice of law in a town like Cresston does not bring sudden wealth if it is unmixed with politics. With all his efforts he could not hope to amass a fortune very soon.

But Cleve had implicit faith in himself. He did not worry long over the question of where his problematical fortune was to come from, for he was satisfied that it would come, sooner or later. In the meantime, having worked so long, he could afford to play a little. . . . There was Rose. . . .

He was in love with Rose. When he thought of her his head grew dizzy and he felt a choking sensation as though his collar were too tight. As this passed he would breathe deeply. This was ridiculous and he was ashamed of it, but at the same time he was helpless under the spell of this uncontrollable excitement. Nothing had ever affected him in quite the same way. It was inexplicable and he was impatient with his impotence before this strange, strong emotion.

He knew all the rapture of love, but he did not wish to be its slave. Even in the beginning of this violent experience he called all his calm forcefulness to order and vowed that he would control the headlong infatuation that possessed him. When he reviewed all that had been, he was less conscious of Rose's beauty than of the gulf between them which she had crossed with a single step.

She had everything. She could charm whom she would, yet she had chosen him. He realized how far afield he had been in his judgment of women; he had gone on, grubbing for years, believing that knowledge gained everything, yet with a single word a woman had proven him in the wrong. Rose cared nothing for his knowledge; it obviously bored her, —she even called him pedantic at times. She had not fallen in love with him because he was clever. He was beginning to discover that women cared nothing for brains, and in the throes of this new adventure he was uncertain whether he or they were more deserving of contempt. In the meantime he abandoned himself to happiness.

Had he cared enough, he could have given all his time to pleasure. The gay, pretty young women of Cresston made him their own. When he was with them they petted and pouted over him; when they could not reach him in person they besought through the telephone and with little notes —calling his mind from graver matters. They tried to ruin him, not dreaming that their light speculative interest was destruction.

George Wickersham, who retained an interest in the boy in spite of his desertion, told him that the women were ruining him and Cleve only laughed. He was confident of his power to pull up when the time came.

"No man ever got far without a woman to help him," he

said, with the wisdom won from other men's sayings, and Wickersham, who had a stout wife and half a dozen children, agreed with a reservation.

"True. But it's got to be the right sort of woman. A wife. A wife chosen from a good family, money or no money. That counts but not as much as other things. . . . A woman you can trust. . . ."

Cleve thought of Bessie. He was very glad that she was safely married, and that the rest of the Wickershams were boys. He thought his friend old-fashioned and far less wise than himself. He was startled when the other man spoke abruptly of other things.

"Your name has been mentioned for Legislature next term. They want a young man and your record abroad will help. If you go easy and make no mistakes. . . ."

Cleve forgot Rose for several hours after that. While he was outwardly busy with the papers on his desk his mind leaped through æons of brilliant moments that saw him pass from one high office to another. The Legislature at his age meant practically anything in twenty years . . . if no mistakes were made. He resolved to make none.

The telephone shrilled at his elbow. Simultaneously he realized the cessation of a sound in the outer office which had punctuated his reflection. The typewriter had ceased its monotonous clicking . . . one of Antonia's duties was answering the calls that came in at her desk and were transmitted to the switches in the private rooms. He was frowning heavily as he took off the receiver in time to speak to her. "I am answering." He did not know that the call was for him, but he believed it might be and he did not care for Antonia as an intermediary.

Rose's voice came like a narrow ribbon of silver unfurl

ing through the instrument. . . . She was lonely. She wanted him.

He became electrified at her first word. The office, his work, all that had held him sunk to insignificance. The future became vague and retreating; there was time enough for that. He was young.

He forgot everything except the necessity of seeing her at once. In the outer room Antonia was bent over her typewriter once more; her dark head smooth as a bird's wing; he caught a glimpse of her profile, pure and cold. Then he forgot her.

Peter was there. Peter had a private room for his own clients, but it was his custom to see most of them in the main office. He explained this by saying naïvely that he got rid of them sooner there, and he had an adroit system of asking questions which concealed their real meaning and left the answerer unembarrassed. Laurence Dupagny was with him now, urging, almost entreating, support for some enterprise of his own. This time it was an irrigation project to be launched in Colorado. Dupagny was dry-lipped and haggard and looked as though he had been sleeping badly. He spoke in that serious half whisper with which men approach other men when they want their money and have none of their own to match with.

"I tell you, it can't fail, Withrow. I'm coming to you with this gilt-edged proposition because you're about the only man in town who has any loose money. Everybody else is up to the neck in spite of the stories you hear. If it was three months later I couldn't offer you the inside price I can to-day. You know how they went after the city bonds and the street railway stock. . . . That's a record for you . . . a town's indebtedness owned by its citizens . . . and they're not going to lose. This town has passed the stage

when it lets its own improvements go to smash, and pretty soon the original investors are going to let loose at a profit. Cresston is full of money—war money—but every cent is invested except what they spend for clothes and automobiles. . . . When they begin to cash in I could walk across the Square and sell every share I hold in this Colorado deal . . . then the price would go rocketing. . . . You see that? I want you to have some away below par, so you can give some of these wise guys the laugh when they have to double your price to get it, if they get it at all. You can clean up on it, Withrow."

"But I don't want to 'clean up,'" Peter argued whimsically, "I have an automobile and all the clothes I can wear. What's the use of having a lot of money? Why should I disturb our good citizens who are satisfied with their railway bonds? They'll be having strikes and other unpleasant scenes in the pleasant streets of our little city if we start trading in stocks. Why not let well enough alone?"

Dupagny flushed darkly and started to rise. "Oh, well! If you are making a joke of it—"

Peter hastened to reassure him. He was not joking; nothing was further from his thoughts. Dupagny resumed his seat, taking up the conversation where he had left off, and Peter listened with the gravest interest. It was at this moment that Cleve entered the room, and both men, glancing up, allowed the subject to lag without understanding why they did so; it seemed that his presence put the questions they had been discussing into the background to make way for more momentous affairs.

Cleve was smiling with an air of insouciance. He tried to meet Dupagny with this smile, but something leaped from the eyes of both men and lay between them like a dagger. Dupagny slumped in his chair, barely acknowledging the

greeting and his heavy brows met in a scowl above the high, thin nose. His manner was brusk and uncivil, in marked contrast to his usual behavior. Cleve was not sensitive, but he could not fail to notice what was almost an affront. He had intended to stop for a few casual words, but he hurried past with only an offhand remark to Peter.

"I'll be back about five," and went out with a short nod to the others.

He went straight to Rose. She was waiting for him in her little living-room that, unlike other Cresston rooms, was always cool and dark and uncrowded with furniture such as other women seemed to think necessary. The Dupagny house was one of the prettiest in town and had an air of luxury which the cost of its contents did not justify, though nobody gave the credit of this where it really belonged—to Rose herself.

She was half reclining on a broad, low, wicker settee beneath a window from which she must have watched his approach. There were deep colored cushions behind her head and in her violet gown her slim body nestled among them becoming a part of the whole. In the dim light she appeared fragile and elusive and the color of her dress accentuated the shadows beneath her eyes. She put out her hand to meet Cleve's with a little caressing gesture. "Did you mind coming?" she murmured.

They were very discreet in their greeting; their lips said little but their eyes spoke of everything. "When we are alone—" her glance seemed to promise.

They were alone in Rose's drawing-room and yet they were not alone. Through the blue curtains that divided the room from another, the slim black and white silhouette of the maid showed for a second, mysterious and fleeting evidence of life in the background of Rose's full life. And

in a little while, as though it had been subdued by his coming, a voice, Miss Plumey's voice, was heard in song.

"She is in the library painting place cards for a dinner," Rose explained with an amused glance. "There is more light there."

Her unexpectedness always fascinated him. He remembered shamefacedly that he had come to this appointment with unrecognized anticipations, but instead of the fulfillment of these vague hopes he found her surrounded, chaperoned, and attended. No chance for a lover here; no stolen hour, —no prearranged bliss.

Rose did not have much to tell him, after all. She seemed content to lie among her cushions, her eyes caressing him with long, veiled glances. And Cleve, by turns responsive, annoyed and mystified by the situation she had prepared for him, took refuge at length in a repetition of the talk which had occurred between him and Wickersham that day.

"The legislature at my age means anything I want a few years from now," he repeated, parroting Wickersham; and added, unconscious that the phrase was not his own, "If I play my cards right and don't make mistakes." Without intending it he reversed the situation, depriving Rose with a mere sentence of her advantage.

The spirit of mischief left her and she became subdued. Her quick instinct leaped to a meaning behind Cleve's words to which he himself was oblivious. It was the first pang of a hundred that she was to feel, though its bitterness was alleviated by his obvious unconsciousness. For a revealing moment she beheld the measureless distance between them which only the strongest, most enduring love could bridge.

"What are you thinking?" Cleve asked, reading the doubt but not its answer upon her face.

She lied to him, of course. In such a case frankness was

impossible. How could she remind him that he was younger than she; at the beginning of his career; and that in the eyes of their world, she herself, might be the "mistake" at which his friend and mentor had hinted.

The black and white maid tinkled delicate glassware near an open door somewhere, and Miss Plumey's chant grew in volume. "Do you love me?" murmured Rose, taking refuge in an ancient formula.

But she did not know Cleve in spite of her power over him. She did not realize how very new he was to situations such as this,—to such women as she . . . to love. He gave her a sullen glance. . . . "Are you laughing at me?"

She was startled.' After a pause she smiled conciliatingly. "Laughing? No. I am jealous. Ethel has told me a pretty story. It seems she has a dressmaker who lives in a boarding-house. To this place has come a beautiful young girl and this girl is employed by Peter Withrow and you. . . . There is a romantic story that she quarreled with her father and left home. Why have I never heard of her?"

In her effort to recapture the spirit of her earlier mood, Rose was guilty of an error. Her words sounded both mocking and proprietory; either tone a direct challenge, and what was meant for banter had only the effect of destroying his good humor. He was frowning when he replied with a shrug, as though tilting the whole affair from his shoulders. "Employed by Peter—not by me. How could I know that you would be interested in his philanthropies?"

"Philanthropies? Then she is not pretty, after all."

"I did not say that. She is even beautiful." She allowed him to see her wince and he was sufficiently annoyed to enjoy the spectacle. But he felt a queer distaste for a discussion which had Antonia for its object. "Let us speak of something else," he said brusquely.

Rose slipped back among her cushions, folding her hands behind her head. Her expression altered to a faint sadness. "I wish I had known you a long time ago," she said dreamily.

In a moment his irritation was gone. In spite of her half-voiced protest he came over and sat beside her on a low tabouret that was meant for tea or cigars. This brought their faces close together and he could see the delicate penciled lines about her eyes, the touch of rouge that, far from lessening, served to enhance her beauty, its daintiness and charm. He looked at every feature eagerly as if to reassure himself that he was familiar with this beauty—that nothing eluded him.

"I wish I had known you long ago," she repeated slowly, "before I knew Larry—when I was a girl."

Men do not indulge in these useless retrospections. Why was she not content with the present? He uttered the vague reassurance of his kind, "I love you best as you are—"

He could not understand that she wanted to give him the best of her, and his own past was too recent to invite excursions into its "might have beens" . . . But he saw the disappointment in her face and turned her slim hand over to kiss its palm.

"Think what we would miss—the dances at the club—moonlight. It would not be the same. . . ." He tried to speak whimsically, but this was dangerous ground. Suddenly they both remembered that she was older than he—six years. She bit her lips in chagrin at the senseless blunder that led to this useless sentimentality. The thought persisted in her mind—she was older than he. It could not last.

He saw the trouble in her eyes without dreaming of its origin. It made him forget everything—even caution.

"How can you be sad when we are together?" he whispered and kissed her lips.

The maid appeared between the blue curtains, wheeling the tea wagon. She came like a ghost with none of the swishing steps and tinkling glasses of ten minutes ago.

"The tea, Mrs. Dupagny," she said, icily.

Rose had forgotten that she herself had arranged this interruption, but she had not foreseen the kiss. She was warm with this triumph of the passing moment and was inclined to smile, making light of the contretemps. "Bring it nearer, Jessie," she ordered, languidly. She wondered how much the girl had seen or guessed but she was not alarmed; she was one of the people who make the mistake of disregarding a servant's opinions. She did not remember that Jessie had chosen domestic service because of a heroic regard for propriety.

It was then that Miss Plumey demonstrated her character of useful friend. In the artistic disarray of a green painting apron and with her hands full of place cards she appeared behind the interfering maid.

"I am not really so rude as I seem," she cried with a gay giggle toward Cleve. "See! You can't imagine how busy I've been to get all these finished in a single afternoon. Mrs. Waddell's cards—all of them. The dinner's going to be wonderful."

And with that Miss Plumey fell upon the tea. She insisted on making it and waiting upon Cleve and Rose as though they were her guests. She claimed with a fantastic assumption of childishness that it was like "playing house," and the others were forced into laughter they did not feel by her elephantine playfulness.

The maid assisted nimbly, as far as Miss Plumey would

permit, but there was a change in her demeanor. She looked everywhere but at her mistress. Rose alone sensed this avoidance. She thought: "Jessie saw us. She knows everything." But this was an exaggerated assumption, for there was nothing to warrant so sweeping an assertion. Fear is a swiftly growing plant, and from the moment the thought entered Rose's mind she knew no peace. Instead of listening to the gay talk of her companions, she was wondering how she could set about restoring Jessie's confidence or buying her silence, if that proved necessary.

When everything was ready Miss Plumey said: "You may go, Jessie," as though both maid and tea were her affair. She was filled with a vicarious importance, knowing very well that she had been asked to come that afternoon to fill the office of chaperone. At the same time she was jealous and resentful of the ease with which the other woman captured and held Cleve Harkness, and her merriment was assumed partly to conceal her spite. Miss Plumey knew that in any case he would never have looked at her, but she could not stifle the feeling that it would have been easier to give him up to any other woman than her friend and patron.

But nothing of this showed on the surface of the tea hour which came to a hilarious close, punctuated with gossip that had been gathered from Miss Plumey's intimacies at other houses. She told an amusing story about the Nevilles, a couple whose bickerings were so well known that to discuss them could not be called gossip.

"He forbade poor Viola to charge anything over a certain amount at the stores," explained the tale-teller, "and that forced her to have a separate account. Well, my dears, one day after Viola had been lunching somewhere she felt

expansive and stopped into Deveraux's and had some perfectly wonderful things sent up. Don't ask me what, Mr. Harkness—well, the stupid clerk charged them to Philip—or Viola forgot to tell them about her own account, or something. . . . Anyway, at the end of the month the charge was not on her bill and she rushed down to the store but it was too late. The bill had gone to Philip and all the things she had bought made a terrific item. Poor Viola went home frightened to death, expecting a scene—but did it happen? It did not. Instead, Philip brought her some roses, the first in six months, and not a word was spoken. She saw the bill in his pocket and the question is—who *didn't* get the things that Viola bought?"

Miss Plumey and Cleve were departing amicably together when they encountered Laurence Dupagny arriving somewhat earlier than was his custom. His greeting was almost uncivil and Ethel gave a nervous giggle. "He looks as though he didn't approve of us," she whispered; "poor Rose, won't she pay for this."

"Does he bully her?" asked Cleve, glancing back at the house they had left. He had not enjoyed the afternoon especially and now a distinct impression of unpleasantness persisted. This sort of thing might be termed "a mistake," to quote Wickersham, and his annoyance extended to Rose. Why should he be placed in the position of gaining a husband's displeasure when the reward was no greater than a walk with Miss Plumey? "Is he unkind to her?" he asked again in an absent voice. He was disturbed by the other man's expression. He had not counted on Laurence Dupagny's enmity.

Rose had not moved from her position by the window when her husband entered. She gave him a little nod and closed her eyes. Her expression gave no hint that she was

acutely aware of his presence or that it disturbed her immeasurably.

"What is it?" she asked finally, when she could endure his intent gaze no longer.

But the scene she expected did not develop. He only sighed in a puzzled, resigned way and when she opened her eyes had left the room to go heavily upstairs.

She followed slowly, with a sense of reprieve. She was suddenly conscious of the nearness of disaster. What had prompted her to send for Cleve and what could come of such meetings except danger for both? She remembered Miss Plumey's stories about other friends and resolved that never again would she put such confidence to the test. She was safe, but she might have lost everything!

An instinct of self-preservation urged her to make herself beautiful in the eyes of the man she constantly betrayed, and she called Jessie from her work in the dining-room to help with her gown.

The girl came unwillingly. Once her silence would have passed unnoticed, but now Rose was keenly alive to the meaning of little things. "Something has disturbed her," she thought, and wondered how she could begin an inquiry.

She remembered her earlier suspicion that the girl might have seen Cleve kiss her! It was too absurd. Why should the creature assume such airs even if this were true? She was indignant at the criticism she read in Jessie's manner and hurt at the lack of charity in one whom she had helped in a hundred ways, but at the same time she reviewed her wardrobe, mentally selecting what articles she could sacrifice as a peace offering.

During the silent dinner the girl did not unbend. There

was none of the pretty understanding she had managed to convey to her mistress and through her service she remained sullen and aloof, with the manner of the domestic whose virtue has been questioned. She was an excellent maid with the capacity for serving carefully developed by Rose, and her hostility was so blended with dignity that her mistress' conscience alone could distinguish between them. The dinner progressed to its last moment and the Dupagnys, having finished their undesired coffee, were about to rise when Jessie, who had been absent in the pantry, reappeared. For the first time she looked directly at Rose.

"My month is up to-morrow, Mrs. Dupagny, and I am leaving," she said.

It was an unfair attack. Rose fell back before it. "Leaving?" she stammered. "What do you mean?"

The girl continued to watch her triumphantly. In a few moments she was making reprisal for all the petty wounds which are unescapable when one woman takes orders from another. She had not known that these were wounds until Rose sacrificed her respect, but now they were magically healed by the sight of discomfiture, which was not what she had expected. "I am going to Mrs. Tyson," she added primly. "A reference is not necessary."

Rose was bewildered. It had been a day of errors. Like Cleve she remembered too late that her action, simple in the beginning, was a "mistake"! She resolved to beware of impulse after this. Impulse had caused her to send for Cleve and now Jessie was going to Nina Tyson who treated her friends more cruelly than any woman in Cresston.

"How fiercely my head aches," she said to Dupagny, taking refuge in the strong citadel which women have built for themselves. She was afraid of any more conversation

that evening—each step seemed to lead to deeper disaster. But Dupagny was thinking of Jessie's desertion.

"We owe her three months," he grumbled; "why do you let servant's wages fall behind? Servants can do more to ruin credit than any other debt."

"Credit?" murmured Rose, and added silently, "If credit were all."

CHAPTER XV

MISS PLUMEY was one of those who from earliest infancy seem doomed to suffer through the idiosyncrasies of others. She was never able to understand, even when she became old and ceased to be an active combatant in life, just why the deeds and inclinations of those within her radius should have the power of reflecting and influencing her own deeds and inclinations. Certainly it was not through her desire that her neighbors' weaknesses and failures became her own. She did not attempt to understand the universal laws which govern this human phenomenon—it is doubtful if she ever heard of such laws. And so she was left free to fret and pine and bruise her shallow breast against the inevitable.

Miss Plumey was not beautiful, yet she had seen others with as little or even less attraction, win triumphantly in the finals of life. She was not charming but she was clever —though not clever enough to diagnose her own weakness.

In her little aims it seemed that she was being continually thwarted—not by the persons whose friendship she sought, but by those from whom she had every right to expect aid and coöperation. Looking backward upon a childhood embittered by bodily existence in an ugly brown house upon a modest side street when her soul was far afield among the great of Armitage and Hyslop Avenues, she could discern, through countless mistakes and disappointments, the truth that much of her tragedy resulted from the low affiliations of her family.

Mrs. Plumey herself was not to be blamed in this judgment. With the adaptability of her sex she had in a measure discarded the customs of her early married life; for constant association with a daughter, whose finer feelings were outraged by stone china and checked tablecloths, had refined and elevated her tastes as well. Gradually she had developed into an unostentatious club woman and improver of the home, and the younger Plumeys, coming after Ethel, were spared much that had distressed the mind of their elder sister. Mrs. Plumey was not impossible. She was a woman competent to take her place upon a committee, and the children showed budding, social ambitions which were carefully nurtured. The Plumeys' shortcomings were chiefly due to Mr. Plumey, upon whom all careful tutoring was a wasted effort. For many years he had enjoyed his supper in his shirtsleeves, and he continued to do so, though the scene of his operations had been changed to a small room opening off the kitchen. He had been a well digger in his early youth and through the years had arrived at the ownership of a plumbing establishment. He was now a taxpayer and a member of the City Council, but nothing had ever refined him and he was not proud from success. His favorite companion was the policeman on the beat. There were many times when his eldest daughter, returning from the spectacle of a friend's wedding, looked upon her parent peacefully smoking a vile pipe in the grape arbor behind the house, and reflected bitterly that it was no wonder she had never married.

On one occasion she was returning from a successful hour with the chosen, triumphing in the reflection that she had been called "Ethel" personally by three of the most exclusive women in town. As she pictured a future that would see her rising consistently in the social scale—in which

flight she would bear with her the more or less dragging impedimenta of an unambitious family—she suddenly found herself confronted by the demoralizing vision of her father in close conversation with the patrolman who seemed to stand like an ogre in the way of her social ambitions.

The Burridges, who had recently made their money in oil and therefore demanded an uncompromisingly clean slate from every one, had driven her to the corner in their blue limousine and even now were moving luxuriously away at throttled third speed. They must have seen—Mrs. Burridge had the eye of a catbird and poor Miss Plumey's heart sank. Mr. Plumey had enjoyed the contract for all the plumbing in the Burridge's new house, which alone was bad enough, and for this reason it was unlikely that he had escaped recognition. Ethel recalled painful passages which must have imprinted the Plumey image upon the Burridge mind ineradicably. Mrs. Burridge was exactly the sort of person to seize upon a little thing and make it the theme of endless conversation. Ethel could hear her saying, "The Plumeys are dreadfully low. Wasn't the man a well digger or something? There is no telling whom you might meet at their house."

All this and more flashed through Miss Plumey's mind in a second as she saw her father and the policeman in familiar, grinning companionship. She passed them with an icy look and went in to her mother.

"Why can't Pa have a little pride? The policeman! And there was Mrs. Burridge looking on. They might have been brothers!"

But Mrs. Plumey had remained matter of fact in many ways, despite her rise in the world.

"Well," she began defensively, "in a way they might as well be brothers, as you say. Eddie Connally and your pa

was raised side by side, and the only difference is that Pa has got on while Eddie hasn't. I'll declare, Ethel, you do talk sort of wild sometimes; anybody would think there were kings and queens in Cresston instead of just ordinary folks, like us and the Connallys and the Burridges."

But when Mr. Plumey came in to supper a half hour later his wife remonstrated with him. "Ethel thinks you are ruining her chances, Pa. You know how snobbish this town has come to be. It isn't like old times. Those have money now that never expected to have any and was never meant for it, and their heads are sort of turned. But if people have these silly notions I suppose we've got to live up to them whether we want to or not, for the sake of the children. The best way to climb is by stepping on somebody else, and my mother used to say—"

"Who's trying to climb anywhere," growled Mr. Plumey, arranging towel and soap, "not me. Anyway not on my frien's necks. I gotta word to say to Ethel. The Plumeys have always been respectable, if not fashionable. So's the Connallys. So's the Burridges s'far as I know. But some of the folks our girl is runnin' with can't lay much claim to anything but fine clothes and such. You tell Ethel to come to me."

And so long as Mr. Plumey was master in his house his family was constrained to obey when he took that tone. Confronted by her parent Miss Plumey lost a measure of her superiority. After all, the plumbing establishment paid the bills.

"I'm not finding fault, Pa," she explained, "but it does look queer, seeing you always with policemen and people like that."

Mr. Plumey smiled. In spite of his crudity he had sufficient insight into the character of his women folk to know

when he held the whip hand. "Ha," he said triumphantly, "ha!" and his daughter was forced by a curiosity that was stronger than her annoyed pride to ask what he meant.

"Ha!" Mr. Plumey repeated victoriously, drying his fingers, "I reckon some of your swell friends would give a pretty sum to be on the right terms with a policeman one of these days. I reckon so." Then with a quick rejection in insinuation and an equally swift resumption of parental authority he emphasized his statement by thumping the screen door in his progress through the house. "Don't ask me questions. I won't answer 'em. But you keep away from some of these folks you're so thick with. One of these days this town's going to tear wide open with a scandal. Don't let me hear the name of Plumey connected up with it. Don't you, now."

Ethel Plumey and her mother were left alone to digest and analyze this hint—to speculate and finally abandon paths that lead nowhere.

"What on earth does he mean?" gasped Miss Plumey, staring open-eyed at her mother.

"Never you mind," the latter reassured, "I'll find out. Edward Plumey can't keep anything from *me*. I'll have it before to-morrow morning."

But all she learned from putting the master plumber through the third degree familiar to all wives who are interested in their husbands' careers, amounted to bewilderment that was pierced by vague high lights of speculation, as the two women tried in vain to manufacture from the hints they received some tangible evidence which would damn certain of their friends.

Mrs. Plumey was completely at sea, but Ethel, permitting herself an ironical smile, remembered bitter hours spent looking on at the unfair love making of others. "If they

only knew," she said to herself. "Perhaps there *is* something—some dreadful scandal about to come to light. Let it come."

But scandals, like summer storms, have a way of threatening long before they break. Not even a woman's ferocious curiosity could force Mr. Plumey's elusive prognostication nearer fulfillment, and weeks after, when the thing should have been disclosed or when its hydra head should have been hidden forever, Ethel Plumey savored the tantalizing cud of uncertainty. She could not forget.

Often when she was fulfilling her mission of useful friend, pouring tea, mending delicate lace hosiery, answering troublesome telephone calls and the like, she was thinking: "Perhaps in a moment I shall know. Some one will say a word. I shall witness a look—and I will know everything."

But this never happened.

One afternoon Mrs. Plumey, who had long since forgotten the incident and was far from imagining herself an instrument of fate, concerned merely with the troublesome details of the younger Plumeys' fall wardrobes, asked her eldest daughter to do an errand.

This was merely the trivial task of carrying a small package of thread trimmings and what not, to the seamstress who lived on sufferance in Mrs. Miller's boarding-house on Thelma Avenue.

It was nearly five when Miss Plumey arrived at her destination. As she stood on the narrow porch and rang the jangling bell, she was blind to the approach of destiny which came to her with the aroma of Thursday night's dinner. So far from welcoming this, she met Mrs. Miller with a disdainful air when the landlady herself opened the door.

"How can people exist in such places? To think that Cleve Harkness once lived here!" was the uncharitable

thought in her mind, while her lips inquired for the seamstress to whom the package belonged.

Mrs. Miller disliked Ethel Plumey and considered her an upstart and a snob, but her welcome gave no hint of her real feelings. Aside from the personal angle, she appreciated the Plumey cleverness which had overridden severe barriers, and, to quote her literally, she was "always willing to give the devil his due." Having a quarter of an hour to spare before she was actually needed in the kitchen or dining-room, she was not averse to a chat with the caller. She apologized profusely for the enveloping apron that covered her ample figure and confided some of her housekeeping woes without which no conversation could properly begin according to boarding-house ethics.

"I have a houseful right now, and busy from morning till night, you may be sure," the landlady sighed, fanning herself with somebody's circular letter taken from the hall table.

"Really?" Miss Plumey was vague. She was sure that no incident connected with Mrs. Miller's guests could be of interest to her. The other confirmed this.

"The house is full," she repeated confidentially, "but it isn't like it used to be a few years ago when one could fill up on gentlemen. The war made a difference in more ways than one. Women—women—I sometimes think I am never to see the end of them. I had made up my mind clearly that I'd refuse the next one, when Antonia Christy came along and wanted a room. It put me in an awkward position, I must say. I couldn't refuse a young girl when she was at outs with her own folks—a perfectly ladylike girl, too, with a father who never provided for her and never will, believe me. Still, up to the last minute I didn't think I'd take her, but when she came walking in with Cleve Harkness that rainy evening, what could I do? It

made more trouble for me, and less money than a young man would pay, but I couldn't say no, right before Cleve, could I? Knowing the quarrel she'd had with her folks, he might have thought something wrong, you know. I had to give in with what grace I had."

Miss Plumey lifted her head. In the semigloom of the hall her profile and throat had a vague resemblance to an eagle poised, searching the horizon for a glimpse of some secret desire.

"Antonia Christy—" she repeated. "Cleve Harkness brought her here?"

"Why, yes." Mrs. Miller made an infinitesimal pause before she answered eagerly. She was flustered a little by her instincts; quick to grasp the meaning of a tone, but defensive. "He brought her here that night. Of course I knew *all* the circumstances—everything, Miss Plumey. She told me when she came to see about the room. She already had her place with Mr. Peter Withrow, and she and Cleve grew up together, like brother and sister, only of course the Harknesses never were a match for the Christys. It was perfectly natural for him to come with her and carry her suitcase. He was so concerned that night, trying to persuade her to go back to her father. He was going to a party, I remember, and his clothes were nearly ruined by the rain, and if ever there was a careful young man about his clothes it is Cleveland Harkness, so it must have taken something more than ordinary to keep him out in such weather without even knowing it was raining." Mrs. Miller paused for breath, feeling that she had said enough to satisfy any one about her position, yet uncertain whether, after all, she had said the right thing.

Miss Plumey's mind, absorbing the high lights of this explanation, raced about like a little boat tossed by the

waves. She was taken by surprise and this sensation prevented her from realizing the full importance of what she had heard. She might have likened her experience to having a door opened and shut in her face with bewildering rapidity; her eyes caught a glimpse, that was all.

While she searched for a careful phrase she remembered the night Cleve had come late to the dance—a night when it had rained. Not even Rose Dupagny had brought him early and this was why. The obscure Christy girl had a claim that transcended other claims and for this he had neglected Rose who believed him to be in love with her.

Her mind, performing gymnastics, recalled the refusal of Rose to return safely in the Plumey carriage after Willetta Porter's desertion. Then later had come the disgraceful scene made by Laurence Dupagny, which was known to every one next day, and Rose, after all, had risked broken bones by going back with Cleve in the car at an unearthly hour—Miss Plumey gasped. So much had been going on under her very eyes.

She was about to speak when there came a confusion of footsteps and voices outside and Mrs. Miller from behind the curtain exclaimed in flurried amazement:

"There she is now—Miss Antonia! Such a sweet girl . . . and as I live, Peter Withrow is with her—Peter Withrow! Ethel Plumey, what does this mean? He is coming in with her, as I live—"

There was no time for a reply. Mrs. Miller and her companion had only just retreated from the hall window when Antonia Christy, calm and unhurried in her movements, opened the door and entered, closely followed by Peter, who gave the two women a quizzical glance followed by a bow that recalled his father, the Colonel, whose manners had been the talk of the county thirty years before.

Antonia, smiling faintly, led the way to the red rep and walnut parlor shrouded in blackness—airless and disapproving as the lowered brows of a world which she did not suspect were in that instant turned upon her.

Peter entered the parlor in her wake, after the bow which had transformed Mrs. Miller into a mere figurehead. He was smiling at some secret thought of his own, but when he found himself alone with Antonia this smile faded and an expression of deep humility replaced it.

"You shouldn't have me here," he said in a low voice that only she could hear, as though he knew of the straining ears outside the door that were grasping for every sound. "Let me go now. I promise anything that you ask."

Peter had been drinking again. It could not be disguised, but Antonia did not shrink from him. She looked into his eyes earnestly as though he were a little boy and she immeasurably older—a deeply understanding look that took note of his weaknesses and the forgotten promises of the past.

"Go, if you wish, Peter," she said, standing away from the door so that he could pass. "But if you will stay with me instead of going away alone, it will make me very happy."

For answer he sat down in one of the stiff red rep chairs and slid his long nervous hands across his eyes. He wanted more than anything else in the world to say the things that their position forbade him to say, and the cowardice that is created from a great desire was a factor in his silence. He knew that if he spoke he might lose the little he could claim of her, but it was hard to take her on the terms she innocently offered. Presently he said: "Why should you bother about me? I'm not worth it. If

I can't keep straight myself you shouldn't hurt your little hands trying to help me along."

She spread her fingers, white and supple now, against the background of her dark serge skirt and smiled back at him. "They are not little hands, Peter. And they'll always be ready to help when you need them. But you mustn't think I'm wanting you more for your sake than my own. Sometimes I'm very lonely."

He understood that. He was lonely, too. They stared at each other without speaking, filled with an overwhelming desire to say to one another the simple poignant things which were in their hearts. But because they were sitting in the red rep parlor of the boarding-house with Mrs. Miller just outside the door, this was impossible.

Peter said absently: "Harkness used to live here, didn't he?" and Antonia answered gayly:

"He did. Perhaps it is Mrs. Miller's mission in life to cradle genius. Tell me, Peter, do you think I am getting along?"

He looked a her gloomily. She was so frail and yet so invincible sitting there before him that it was amazing to think of her power. But he felt no gratitude for her generous spirit loaned to his own in the hour of its eclipse. Manlike, having this, he wanted more and was tortured because he could not demand everything for which he was longing.

"Why do you want to be a genius? You are a woman," he said brutally.

She flushed slowly but her eyes met his unwaveringly. "That is not like you, Peter! This is why I asked you to come with me to-day. When you are—not yourself—you say things that are so cruel. You hurt your friends—

every one. It would be better to wound their bodies than their hearts."

His head sunk. "Why do you bother with me, Antonia?" he said wearily, for the second time. "There's a dozen men who would make pretty speeches to you; yet you choose to listen to me."

"Because I care so much for you, Peter," she murmured with tears in her eyes. "Who has been so good to me?"

He lifted his eyes to look at her. "Antonia, do you really care—"

She could not mistake the meaning beyond his words and she was struck by the fear that this might lead to chaos. Instead of helping him, she might be driving him further away. Yet what could she say?

But he read the indecision in her face and spared her a reply. "I know you don't," he said with unexpected gentleness, "but if I can be your friend that will be enough."

"Oh, please understand," cried Antonia with a break in her voice, "I don't want any of these things—they are not for me. I never cared for all that makes the lives of other girls—you know, Peter. We have talked it over a hundred times. But friendship—ah, that is a thing worth while. We will be friends, Peter, all of our days, and sometime when we are old you will come to me and say how very wise we have been to keep it warm and secure when there have been shipwrecks all around us."

"What a cynic you are, child," Peter returned with a smile. "Where did you learn to doubt the fundamental law? Not in your own home, I am sure."

"Yes, I learned it there," she said unexpectedly, "from my own father and mother. Why should life be so unfair? My mother loves and suffers through her children, but my father suffers only through his thwarted ambitions. Even

I was part of his disappointment. He would have loved me as a son."

"He loves you now," said Peter gently, and added in a tone of prophecy, "you will know that when love comes to you."

Miss Plumey was about to depart in a daze. Events, possibilities, had crowded her unfairly in the last half hour. She stepped out on the porch and Mrs. Miller followed, because she, too, was aghast before the telepathic communication of the other's attitude. She even accompanied Miss Plumey down a part of the five steps, whispering in a strained monologue.

"I am taken out of my wits. I don't know what to think. If ever there was a nice girl, I believed Antonia Christy was one . . . but there must have been something behind the way her pa behaved. Heavens above! Two of them! And bringing Peter Withrow into my house in that condition. I could smell the liquor as he passed me as plain as anything I ever smelled."

But Miss Plumey only heard the half of this. Her eyes and ears had given her mind the clew it sought, and her thoughts were racing far beyond Mrs. Miller's weak surmise.

"If you will ask Mrs. Sneath to come over to our house to-morrow—" she murmured vaguely, "I'm sure mamma wouldn't approve—she is so careful whom I meet—Good-by."

Mrs. Miller was left to gaze speechlessly after Ethel Plumey as she carried the reputation of her house away in her hands. She was perfectly aware that before night the news would flash over the unseen wires of the town that her house was run on lax principles, but Mrs. Miller was first a woman, then a landlady, and her bow was human as Peter Withrow passed her on his way out.

Peter drove his gray car to another county and back that night, but he did not get drunk as he had intended to do. In the fierce loneliness of the night hours he fought the thing out and conquered; all the time hating the weak spirit that made the fight necessary. For a long time he had yielded in such struggles when the craving came upon him, but to-night was different. If Antonia cared— The thought rushed to his brain like a swift flame and then was quenched by the cold light of reason. She did not care as he wanted her to care.

That afternoon, at the first symptom of his coming downfall, she had given out all her sweetness and gentle trust, and the strength of it had seized upon his lagging spirit and drawn it upright beside her own. And she had held him there until he could stand alone. When he turned the car homeward, long past midnight, he was ashamed and humble, but he no longer lingered on the thought of her caring.

The night was in its deepest hours when he stopped the gray car before the Sheridan Building. He knew that there would be no sleep for him that night, and he remembered some papers that should have been gone into that day. Work is the best panacea for thought and he had had enough of thinking.

It was so late that even the watchman, believing himself safe, had slipped into some remote corner for a nap. An atmosphere of stillness that was almost uncanny hushed the night, nowhere so silent as between high walls and paved streets. The elevator had ceased running long ago and Peter, stepping lightly, was halfway up the first flight of stairs when he met the woman.

It was like a meeting of ghosts. The stairs were so dimly lighted, the unexpected presence so vague and elusive, clinging to the wall in shadowy, supplicating fear, that it was

like the quick shifting of a dream, gone before realization. . . .

When he reached his own door he saw that there was a light against the frosted transom of the office and in a moment he opened the door and confronted Cleve Harkness in a blue velvet housecoat, smoking a cigarette as he lounged in an office chair.

The two men looked at each other rather blankly. It was not their custom to meet at three o'clock in the morning on this common ground, and both were at a loss for words to reduce the situation to a natural footing. But Peter having a slight advantage was first to speak.

"You did not expect me," he said calmly, advancing into the room until he stood directly in front of the other.

Cleve made no attempt to conceal his amazement which verged upon consternation. His habitual air of boyish complacency gave way to something like confusion. He fumbled with the loose papers on the desk before him and found nothing to say.

"I thought I would look into the Norton business," Peter went on, moving over to his own quarters. "Don't let me disturb you. Can't sleep, you know. . . . Good time to read, everything still as a grave, thank the Lord."

But after the first demoralizing moment Cleve saw that he had nothing to fear from Peter, and he managed to recover his self-possession. He gathered the papers on his desk into a formless mass and offered them to his partner with an indifferent smile. "I was looking into it myself," he said easily. "I had no idea you were interested."

"I am interested in everything," Peter returned. "The unusual always excites my interest to fever heat. But it does seem queer that you and I who are so widely at variance on most points would be agreed upon the Nortons."

Cleve felt himself humiliated; he knew that Peter was laughing at him and secretly enjoying his confusion, or believed that he was. The situation was worthy of something better than this. He felt the need to insult Peter, since Peter would not insult him.

"I thought you were drunk again," he said with a sneer, "that was why I bothered."

"Ah!" said Peter. He was merely contemptuous, not angry. He spoke in the tone of whimsical satire that always maddened the younger man. "Antonia would not let me get drunk. She took me home with her to that boarding-house where she lives, and we decided that there were things in life better worth while than time wasting. She gave me a pretty lecture and it pulled me up short. Do you remember when you lived in that house, Harkness? It is a queer place that reminds me in a way of a railway station. The people who come there only stop between trains to pick up food and sleep. It is full of women now, all earning their living with pretty, delicate little fingers—all of them rushing hither and thither, making life for themselves. It made me wonder what had become of the men who used to catch all the trains. It made me think—"

Cleve was stung. "You allowed Antonia to do that—for you!" he exclaimed violently. "Do you want to ruin her? Think of what people would say if they saw her trying to reform you—picking you up on the verge of one of your lapses— A man should protect a woman who trusts him—"

Their eyes met

CHAPTER XVI

THE rings on Rose's fingers were growing loose. There were three diamonds and a pigeon blood ruby—none of them large stones but very pure, and sometimes when she stood at the window that commanded the street, she would twist these rings about, smiling cynically as she observed the difference in the size of her fingers.

Her dressmaker remarked it also. "We'll have to change all your measurements, Mrs. Dupagny," she complained.

Dupagny noticed nothing. They did not see much of each other; business was bad and Dupagny's time had become a ceaseless unrewarded search for financial backing which would see him over these dark days. His feverish optimism was not daunted, nor would he accept the warning of each failure. He could not see that his race was nearly run.

When he could do so, he avoided Rose, but from a different cause than that which sent her shrinking from his approach. The two seldom spoke of their affairs, plans, or the castle building which had once been their pastime. All this had vanished, swept away before an oncoming depression that left no foundation for visionary hopes; and this sad tide, coming remorselessly closer day by day, numbed their senses and blinded their eyes until they could not feel its approach.

The house, once so gay, was changed. The veranda was no longer the meeting place for Rose's friends, and its bright cushions vanished before the dust storms and sweeping winds that came early that year. All the verandas up

and down Armitage Street were equally bare except for the falling leaves that escaped the housemaid's broom, but the brightness had not been transferred to the interior of Rose's home as in the others. The change was more certain here than outside.

Jessie had been replaced by a lazy, good-natured negress who took advantage of her mistress' preoccupation and allowed the rooms to become hopelessly littered; blighted by that miasmic condition which marks a house without a heart.

There had been no little parties or teas for weeks. Rose had forgotten or had ceased to care. The women she had once sought to please, the forms which had been so important, meant nothing to her any longer. The vague slipping away of all customs barely touched her. When she thought of it at all she promised herself that to-morrow she would take up the reins, adjust herself, and again become the leader of the petty little play.

But she never did. To-morrow would find her gazing unseeingly from the window, twisting the rings on her fingers, listening for the telephone.

Dupagny found her like this one day when, contrary to his habit, he came in at lunch time. He scowled suddenly, aware of the chill, inhospitable atmosphere of the room; the dust motes circling in a ray of sunshine; Rose, herself, in a morning negligée. He gave one look at all this and his gloomy eyes returned to her indifferent face.

"A nice sort of home to come back to," he snarled. He had been out of town on one of his frequent excursions to other sources of revenue and the alteration in the house and in Rose struck him with renewed force, following as it did a series of disappointments, bitter and unprofitable. As he looked at her his glance kindled with the anger that

at last finds a subject to feed upon. She recognized this and shrugged her thin shoulders.

"Why return?" she questioned wearily.

"By God . . . the time will come when I'll not return. . . . You'll send for me and I'll not answer. . . . You can't keep this up. No!"

His voice was inarticulate. She was startled by the passion he betrayed and this captured her straying attention. She saw that she must win him from this mood which threatened to interfere with her own, for she shrank with nervous dread from the jangling discords of a domestic quarrel. She played the card that is always in a woman's hands. "If you gave me the money to keep the place properly—"

She had him there. He stammered—"I've always given you everything I could—"

She was not listening. She wished that he would go and not stand there arguing, regretting what would not come again. Suppose the telephone rang while he was in the room! It would be like him to listen, to insist on knowing who called. And the instrument was just outside the door where every word could be overheard. She grew feverishly anxious; certain that something disastrous would happen before he left the house. Fear gave a strange touch of asperity to her soft voice.

"What do you want, Larry? Are you tired from your trip? Shall I have Emily give you some luncheon?"

He sat down heavily. Now that she focused her attention upon him she saw how desperate he was, how pale and distraught. He struggled not to meet her eyes. In spite of the chill in the room there was a faint gleam of perspiration upon his forehead and he passed his handkerchief over his face repeatedly.

"It has come to this, Rose. I must have some money. . . . I couldn't get a dollar in Evanston . . . everybody is tightening up, or rushing away to spend their money in the big towns. . . . My deals are too small to attract them. . . . If I could get to New York with something good—but before that I've got to have a little real money to tide over—"

She felt a queer sense of relief, as if he had given her a word of commendation when she had expected blame. She saw his wavering glance come to rest upon her hands as the shaft of sunlight that was the home of the dancing motes sent a flash of fire from the jewels on her fingers. At least she could help a little. The instinct of giving where she had defrauded lightened her spirit to a flash of spurious gayety. She drew the loose, glittering rings off one by one; now she knew why she had been twisting them so long. She dropped them into Dupagny's hand.

"They will bring something. Perhaps in a little while—"

"Your rings! My God, Rose, I haven't come to that yet. . . ." He protested against the sacrifice fiercely, though he had come home for that very purpose, driven by the inexorable, shameful need of money for the little things of every day—those unnecessary, unwanted things that obtrude themselves at every turn. "I can't take your rings, Rose," he said huskily.

But these were only empty words and it ended, as they both knew it would, in Dupagny dropping the jewels into a little unused pocket with an elaborate air of unconcern, as though they were baubles of small worth. He explained with rising spirits that their disappearance would be a mere matter of a few days.

"This puts you in line with all the other society women," he said, attempting jocularity. "And you're a good sport,

Rose, in spite of everything. Some day I'll hang you with diamonds like a rajah's bride."

She heard him in silence, feeling only contempt for his shallow relief. The rings had been her mother's—she might never see them again. "Perhaps you had better go," she said coldly, "Emily is always cross at an unexpected luncheon."

Her coldness quenched his faint elation. Now that the trivial but burning need had been met, his mind turned to other matters less important and more familiar. He noticed her abstraction, the enforced patience with which she listened to him, so plainly longing for him to go.

"Why are you at home to-day?" he asked with newborn suspicion. "It's rather unexpected, finding you in on a day like this—and unusual."

She glanced at the world outside her window. She had not known the sort of day it was; to cover her thoughts she made the trite excuse, "I haven't anything to wear—nothing new. Every one is getting their autumn clothes."

During their life together he had heard that a thousand times. Clothes—clothes—clothes. He had been trained to sympathize with this need as all husbands are trained, and her complaint never failed to arouse his masculine instinct of protection.

"Don't worry, little girl," he soothed in the tone she knew so well. "One of these days we'll show this town what it means to spend money—" With the rings in his pocket he was anxious to get away, yet, drawn by some unaccountable instinct created from her strange depression, he lingered. "By the way," he said with an abrupt change of tone, "I heard a bit of news to-day—about a friend of yours—young Harkness."

All her self-control could not subdue her start of alarm,

and he noted this with a leaping flame of jealousy. The mention of Cleve's name had been purely involuntary, but now he believed that he had struck the note of her mood. She flushed and turned pale, trying to conceal her agitation. It was as though he had reached into her heart with an unerring touch and found the name that was always present in her thoughts. He paused, watching her suspense curiously. "Not entirely about him," he went on, slowly, "but his father—old Saul Harkness. The old man is about to pass out, I believe, and somebody hinted to me that he'd been putting by a penny or two all these years. I suppose he'll leave his money, if he has any, to a home for dogs."

"But could he do that?" she asked, moistening her lips. "Could he really disinherit—his son—if he had anything to leave?"

Dupagny laughed rather oddly as he turned to the door. "Oh, no. His son would undoubtedly inherit—if there is anything. I will be interested in watching developments. . . . Let me congratulate you, my dear, on your foresightedness in making friends. Without your backing it would be rather difficult for me to approach the young heir—if he is one. All that money lying hidden for years should be put to work at once." He saw her shiver. "It does sound rather cold-blooded, but we're living in a cold-blooded age. You have to fight for what you want, whether it's money or a woman. Don't try to look shocked, Rose. You know that if Cleve Harkness gets a lot of money he'll probably forget every friend he has—if they let him. You've seen it done more than once."

"You are very cynical," she forced herself to say.

"Not cynical; merely sensible. He's that sort. He's used everybody he could for stepping stones—some day he'll use the town itself—especially if he gets the money. He started

out to climb to success on other men's shoulders. . . ." He smiled dryly, knowing that he had punished her. "But you like him—I should do the same."

He was gone at last and she flew to the telephone. She was choking with impatience and it was impossible to wait in the hope that he would call later. Sometimes he did not call for a day or two and now she remembered this as an omen. He was overly cautious on her account and she never called his number without the chilling anticipation of his displeasure, but Laurence Dupagny's words had made a profound impression on her because she sensed beneath them a vestige of truth she could not deny. . . . It was as though he put into words a tiny fear that had long lain at the bottom of her heart, poisoning her happiest moments. . . .

When Cleve's voice came to her over the wire she could hardly speak. With her ringless fingers she kneaded her throat, loosening the muscles that contracted at his first word.

But she left the instrument gayly exuberant as she always was after a few words with him. His voice was always the same, tenderly caressing, secretly pleading, worshipful.

Emily followed her to her room where she was searching rapidly through drawers and closets, assembling a toilette for the street. The colored girl adored and admired her mistress in the same way that her race loves all that is colorful and exotic. Her interest took the form of maternal scolding.

"Yoah ain' goin' out without a little bite of somethin'. . . . Now don't you act like that, Mis' Dupagny. Don' throw them looks at me. You can't stand up against that wind without a morsel since mornin'. . . ."

Emily was not Jessie by a wide margin, but she fastened

her mistress's frock and laced her high boots creditably. Rose was plainly dressed in a dark blue serge walking suit with a bit of fur about her neck, although it was still summer. She wore a thick dotted veil through which her beautiful eager face shone like a cameo. In the mirror she saw the maid watching her with speculation lurking behind her admiration.

It was mid-afternoon when she hurried through the side streets, avoiding houses she knew, turning her face away when she met cars or people. Once a limousine freighted with laughing, pretty women in afternoon frocks whirled around a corner and she found herself facing a half dozen faces she knew too well. But they did not see her, being intent upon their own affairs, and she did not have to explain why she was lurking there in a dark, stuffy frock with fur about her neck and a thick veil, while the rest of her world laughed in chiffon.

On one of the shabby streets that branched away from Christy Square with all its new splendors, the Iris Theater was squeezed miserably between an automobile repair shop and a basket grocery, both spilling their wares upon its threshold, crowding its poor, gaudy three sheets with advertisements of somebody's tires and the price of potatoes. The dingy girl at the wicket gave Rose a ticket and she passed in behind two arguing women who detained her for an endless minute outside the brownish green curtain that screened the aisle. At that hour the place was nearly empty, and she slipped into an obscure seat to gaze unseeing at the beginning of what was meant from the very first to be the tragic history of love diverted from sane and normal paths into an impassable labyrinth of adventure and intrigue.

Cleve was late and she put her handbag on the next seat

to hold it for him although there was a wilderness of vacant chairs on every side. When her eyes became accustomed to the gloom she picked out couples here and there, usually in the side rows along the musty walls, sitting close together with hunched shoulders, whispering indistinguishably. These were lovers who, having no right to meet each other in the light of day, had discovered this corner where they might gaze at each other unmolested. It was the little hour of their day when they could be together—sometimes it was at the beginning of their story and sometimes at the end. When the droning mechanical piano ceased for a moment, their whispering became audible like the wings of trapped insects seeking escape. Invariably the attitude of these couples was the same; the woman sat a little forward in her chair, her face drooping anxiously, and the man leaned toward her with his lips almost touching her cheek, their secret interchange of words proceeding without pause through the endless repertoire of the mechanical piano, through the intermissions, the beginning and end of films.

A bulky man stumbling in the darkness forced his way along the row of chairs and tried to sit beside Rose. She almost shrieked aloud, her nostrils assailed by the odor of his clothing and his coarse body so near her own. She put her hand against his arm and pushed desperately. There was no aisle on the other side and if he had taken the chair she would have been forced to escape by climbing past his knees.

He stared at her stupidly, not understanding her panic; she could see the reddish square of his surprised face.

"This seat is taken—taken—" she gasped. "There are so many others—" He slouched sheepishly away.

Cleve came at last. With the realization of his presence her nervous fear and distaste fled. She was ashamed and

almost sorry for her rudeness to the wretched man who had blundered into her presence. The sordid, musty odorous place became touched with romance; its walls shut in love and a thousand little secret happinesses. She breathed deeply of enchanted air as his fingers closed over hers.

He discovered the absence of her rings at once. "What have you done with them?"

It was impossible to keep anything from him. She hated herself for disloyalty while she hurried to explain. She told him that Dupagny needed a little money—she had given him the rings for a few days; every one was hard up at times. It was nothing to be serious about; people bought diamonds for the sole reason of having collateral at hand when they needed it quickly. While she whispered this, trying to excuse the husband whom she betrayed, she felt herself upon false ground. The situation was slipping out of her hands. For a long time she had sensed that with every confidence given to Cleve she gained a little less of his. She brought her explanation to a close haltingly—an awkward close—feeling intensely her disadvantage, and Cleve said with righteous disgust:

"What a rotter the fellow must be to take your rings!"

"He's been decent to me—as decent as he could," she defended.

They were on the verge of a quarrel in the moment of their meeting, and with Laurence Dupagny as the object of the disagreement. Realizing this, they stopped short and looked at each other, lettting the passion that united them come into its own once more.

"Tell me why you wanted to see me to-day?" Cleve asked, pressing her slim, bare fingers.

But it was too late to ask her that. One of those instantaneous adjustments had taken place in her mind at the

moment of this quarrel, and she knew that she would never tell him what she had heard from her husband that day. If it were true he would know in time, and the future would happily arrange itself. She gave an evasive answer to his question.

"Why—I was lonely. There seemed to be nothing ahead for us. He is staying home so much of late."

"And you are not going out as you did," said Cleve suddenly, startling her as Dupagny had done, earlier in the day. "There are half a dozen parties this afternoon—" His tone added, "Why are you here?"

There had been no invitations for her that day. Instinct warned her to hide this fact from him, though she disdained its triviality. There were a dozen reasons why she might have been left out—nobody owed her anything, for she had not entertained in many weeks. She made these excuses in her own mind, knowing all the time the fact of making them proved she was lost.

"Parties bore me," she said at last, vaguely.

As though he sensed some reserve in her he went on persistently. "Are you going to the Tysons to-night? It was unwise to come to this place when we might meet there in a few hours."

She lied quickly but ineffectually. "I don't think I'll be there. Larry has an engagement and I hate going about alone."

He turned to look at her searchingly. In the gloom the white outline of his face hardened. Its softness was lost and with that its charm; a faint cruelty became an apparent warning.

"Were you asked? Have the Tysons cut you?"

The baldness of this made her gasp. She summoned her pride, trying to be angry and disdainful.

"You know that is not true. She would not dare. But we were never friends—why should she ask me to everything she has?"

They were almost quarreling again. A little while ago it had been enough to be silently near each other.

After this dull silence fell between them. Rose, gazing emptily at the flickering screen, found herself following the foolish story pictured there. Some one was in mimic anguish—an impossible woman who wept carefully without distorting her face; a fool whose difficulties might have been adjusted by a word. But some fantastic similarity in the story held her—the theme was a thousand years old—the woman loved and the man forgot. She was always trying to win him back and he was as hard as stone.

"It's glorious seeing you for a stolen hour like this. I wish we never needed to part," whispered Cleve, trying to recapture the thrill that had left his voice.

"If—something should happen—" she whispered back dreamily, "If a magical good fortune smoothed everything for us—if one of us should be rich—would you be happy?"

"What are you thinking of?" he questioned sharply.

She had a quick change of mood. "I heard an absurd thing about you the other day," laughing half hysterically. "Almost a scandal. You should never lecture me after this—that girl in your office—"

"Well—what of her?"

"Oh, that interests you! Well, there is a story going around about her. She left her home, didn't she? Quarreled with her father. And when she had to find another place to stay, you took her to some friends of yours?"

"Rose! What infernal thing is this you are trying to say? Antonia Christy— Good God! We have no right to

mention her name—in such a place as this! Don't say that again. There is nothing to such a story—nothing! I have known her all my life." He was breathing fast. It was plain that there was more than a hot denial on his lips and that he fought against such utterance.

"You have known her always, and now when she is in difficulties she turns to you—I see. But you have never mentioned her to me. I have heard that she is very beautiful. . . ."

He made a gesture of intense impatience, but she was too far gone in jealousy and unhappiness to recognize this. She knew that she was all wrong and that the quarrel which had been just below the surface of their thin self-control might break into an open rupture at any of her ill considered words; but she could not be silent. She felt as if a hand, irresistible and malicious, were pushing her further and further into the breach.

"You have spoken of this before," said Cleve, trying to be calm. "Why do you refer to it again? I have told you that there is nothing in it."

"Then why have you never told me the pretty story of your chivalry?" she demanded, with quivering lips.

A memory came creeping back to him like red fires gone nearly gray. A night of rain, a long ride with Rose's slender, warm body pressed against his side. Why should the recollection thrill while her presence left him unmoved? It was easier to think of Antonia, sane and sweet, saying good-night from Mrs. Miller's porch—but his mind had held this image remote and pale beyond that night of flaming splendor!

"I had forgotten," he said in a wearied tone.

On the screen before their inattentive eyes the figurines were approaching the end of their tragedy. The fool, unable

to recapture the thing she had lost, developed frenzy. She was about to die. With wild eyes set in the mask of her caricatured face she hunted in a drawer and found what she sought.

"She is going to kill herself—she has found a pistol in the drawer," scoffed Rose, grimacing. She was about to rise when he restrained her. His attention had been caught by the climax.

"No—you will see!" he predicted with his boyish laugh.

He was right. The film spun off in dreary anticlimax and inanity. Nothing like that could ever happen. . . . Life was like that—always finding excuses for going on, compromising.

Rose got up to go. He made a pretense of keeping her longer. "When will I see you again?"

"I cannot say. We shouldn't make plans—you said so yourself—"

"Well. then—you will call me, won't you, dear?"

She left before him, choosing a moment when the dreary trickle of exits was thickest. Outside the late afternoon sun was shining fiercely and the sudden glare gave her an excuse for the tears that rushed to her eyes. She had not said half she meant to say. The time was so short. He was not in earnest when he asked her to stay longer.

The fur about her neck was suffocating, but she was safely away from this place. At the corner she stopped before a hardware store where rows and rows of cooking utensils were strung on a wire. She pushed the furs aside and priced these articles with a bargaining air.

Dupagny reached the house shortly after Rose's arrival. From behind her locked door she heard him moving about in his own room, shaving, dressing, whistling. He seemed carefree, now that he had possession of her jewelry.

At dinner she would barely look at him and his confidence evaporated under her coldness.

"I'm glad we didn't go to the Tysons to-night," he said, "it's good to be alone once in awhile."

Was she never to hear the last of the Tysons and their stupid parties? Cleve was there; she knew he would go if only to cover her absence. They would give him the prettiest woman in the room for a supper partner.

"Tyson has been pretty cool to me lately," mused Dupagny, refusing to let the subject alone. "Have you and the missus had a row? It might have been better to accept. The Tysons are a power in this town, you know."

"She didn't send me a card," explained Rose with dry lips. She had to say the truth; it gave her a certain satisfaction, as though in some way the curtain of deceit that covered her was lifted a little. She looked at him coolly, enjoying his consternation.

"No! What—what—!" she had a disagreeable consciousness of his wide eyes and hanging mouth.

"No, they didn't ask us! Nina calls us 'hangers-on.' They know we are frauds——frauds——." She stood up violently; a coffee cup was overturned, the cloth pulled awry.

He did not follow her upstairs and she was thankful for that. There had been enough of uarreling for one day. She was mentally exhausted; more words would have found her without a reply. It was a relief to lie inertly on her bed watching with half-closed eyes through the lacy branches of the trees outside her window the dust of stars coming out—

Late in the night Dupagny returned. She heard his steps coming up the walk, dragging steps; the faint click of his latch-key, then his progress upstairs. He paused before

her door as she knew he would, turning the baffling knob softly. She hid her face in the pillow. The door was safely locked. For a long time it had been locked.

She would not listen or she could have heard him whispering her name. Presently he turned away and in his muffled footsteps there was something mutely pleading—entreating, like a voice to which no answer is given. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THE news of old Saul's death held the interest of the town. In life he had been as unimportant as one of the springless chairs rocking sadly in the wind on the sidewalk before his door, but in death he became important. People were excited over the problem of whether he had left behind him sixty or one hundred thousand dollars. As a matter of fact, it was nearer the lesser sum, but by the time the truth was known other events had taken the edge from speculation. Cleve, as the heir, occupied the public eye as he had never done in the character of hero. The war hysteria was dying down and the sight of khaki no longer brought tears or heart throbs; it was an achievement to turn this dying interest into feverish curiosity.

As Cleve himself assimilated the astonishing news, he weighed all these advantages and measured the easy heights so amazingly raised before him, while he maintained a proper air of regret and decorous grief. He was too subtle to pretend actual sorrow, which he knew no one expected him to feel, but he was lavish in the statement that if he had known of the miser's fortune in time, he would have conquered the penuriousness which made it possible.

The money was in Wickersham and Frye's hands,—they had known all along, it seemed. When he was alone and could give vent to the mingled chagrin and triumph of his mood, Cleve was humiliated to think that without doubt he owed his early success to his secret future. His wounded

self-esteem recalled even Bessie and her ardent pursuit of his youth. Perhaps she knew, and it was old Saul's fortune that she coveted instead of his heart.

But this phase of self-disillusionment was soon mitigated by the possession of the actual money and in time the only result was an impalpable hardening of his nature, struck in its vulnerable point. If they had accepted him once for an unknown benefit, they should give him openly in the future what his brains, with the lever of money, could extract.

He was not offended by the instantaneous change in his position which occurred with the announcement of his heritage. He was not sensitive and to his code it was perfectly fair that his value increased with his possessions. This was a law the justice of which he could recognize and admit, and the only emotion he felt was annoyance at his own credulity that had taken for granted the popularity which belonged solely to youth and a pair of good dancing legs. He saw clearly now that in a little while this popularity, founded upon nothing tangible, must have waned. Failure, ignominy would have resulted. He was able to be glad that fate had caught him in time. Reversing the usual procedure, the money put a check upon his headlong descent into insignificance.

He had always been popular with women and his changed condition merely increased this, but he saw with cynical indifference the vast readjustment of his status before his own sex. Their faintly contemptuous attitude altered to a visible respect. They had belittled his standing with their wives and daughters, but now they admired the qualities that won the praise of their women. Bankers invited him to lunch and old Saul was spoken of everywhere as a "collector."

One of the first changes considered by the newly rich

young man was the dissolution of his partnership with Peter; much as personal inclination urged this, instinct warned against it and in the end instinct prevailed. In spite of the Harkness money he was Cleve Harkness still, and Peter was a Withrow, with ten times as many dollars. In disposing of this thought he was not prepared for the advent of Peter with the identical suggestion on his own part.

"We might manage to straighten up all that we have on hand by the first of the year," Peter argued; "no use pulling in double harness when it don't fit, my boy. We'll never learn each other's ways, d'ye think?"

Cleve knew then that from the first Peter had wanted be free of their bond, but his poverty had prevented the utterance of this wish. He did not underrate the other's generosity in remaining silent under the goad of a tie which irked them both; he merely thought Peter rather a fool to think of some one else before himself. Had their positions been reversed there would have been no partnership in the beginning, but now he gave an injured consent to the suggestion; there was nothing else to do. But when he spoke to Antonia of the matter he wore an aggrieved and defrauded air which appealed instantly to her sympathies, as it would have done to any woman.

"I suppose I'll never see you when Withrow and I separate," he complained. "You never have time to speak to me now; I actually see less of you than when you lived at home, Antonia."

This was true. For weeks their intercourse had been confined to nods and murmured good-mornings. Sometimes even these were missing, when her head was bent over her work, or when he passed her desk preoccupied and remote. Reminded of their barren friendship Antonia blushed with

painful remembrance. There had been no time when he was near that she did not feel his presence; her absorption was a poor makeshift if he had cared enough to seek beneath the shell of her pretense. But she had known for a long time that their little romance, brief and delicate as a sigh, existed only for her, in the rare times she allowed herself for retrospection. Aloud she said:

"Major Bailey is coming in with Peter. I suppose I shall be very busy then."

Cleve permitted himself a slight sneer. "Bailey? So he will be here to order you around? Are you still in love with a profession, Antonia, or are you ready to admit that it is not enough?"

He was in an ugly mood. His pride was wounded by Peter's defection and he suddenly regretted that he had accepted dismissal so weakly. This news opened up a fresh train of thought. Bailey was a safely married man, the respectable, august father of half a dozen young Baileys. He had searched for some reason for Peter's sudden resolution, aside from their constant warfare and here it was. His place in the firm was to be filled with a man whose presence could never touch Antonia. Could it be that Peter wished to seclude her from contact with himself?

"Look here," he said in a dictatorial tone, "has that fellow been making love to you?"

Antonia trembled. She should have been indignant, but her emotion could not be called indignation or anything of that nature. It was too ridiculous to say that she was happy but it is certain that his manner thrilled her.

"You have no right to speak in that way," she said unsteadily, and tried to look at him with coldness that turned into a burning blush.

As Cleve returned this look a thought dazzled him. He

had forgotten Antonia for a long time and with her their childish romance that had been too fleeting to know by such a name, but when he saw the color in her face, this recollection returned like a story read and forgotten. He remembered their meetings, always by chance and yet predestined; the dusky spring nights when she had fluttered across his path like a white moth. As a sleeper grasps at bits of reality, he tried to recover moments they had spent together, but in the kaleidoscopic months that intervened, all sequence was lost. But one fact presented itself with startling clarity, —for Peter to plan his removal from contact with Antonia presupposed one certain condition; Peter must be in love with her himself.

Vistas of possibilities opened before this thought. Peter's interest in Antonia; his championship when she wanted to study law,—the whole story was plain. He found himself, when alone, cursing Peter with unexpected bitterness. "Damn him, he isn't fit to speak to her,—the drunken brute!"

He had a hundred important matters to think of, but all these were postponed while he thought about Antonia. She had suddenly assumed new and precious virtues in his eyes. He had always known they were there, but like hidden jewels, meant only for his eyes. He was bewildered to find another man searching for them and grasping them. And he hated Peter for other reasons than this.

He almost planned to go to Antonia's father with the story. Peter wanted him out of the way,—Peter planned to be alone with Antonia! But better judgment forced him to part reluctantly with this plan. Its crudity and foundation of mere suspicion made it untenable. Old Christy would demolish it with a word. Not even his swiftly evolving jealousy could send him on such a mission without better

arms. In a few hours he overreached months of indifference,—constituting himself Antonia's guardian and protector. He believed her to be totally unconscious of the machinations attributed to Peter. He was honest in his conviction that harm or at least an unwise influence was hovering over her, such as only he could see and forestall. His own thoughts of her were idealistically high and noble; he alone appreciated her purity and simplicity.

The recollection of Rose's insinuation filled him with anger and distaste. To him it was fabrication,—no one could seriously connect Antonia Christy with anything less than honor and probity. He forgot that he himself had already built up a melodrama with Peter as villain.

In the weeks that followed his father's death Cleve saw Rose only a few times. With the romantic aura of money left behind him, old Saul could not be ignored, and his heir was debarred from society except in so far as chance encounters in tearooms and discreetly sympathetic chats over the telephone or brief single calls might be termed social. He did not meet Rose in tearooms any more, but he did talk to her from his rooms,—always in the tenderest tones, but with an annoyed frown she could not witness.

He was far from admitting, even to that secret self which was his treasured counselor, that he had ceased to care for Rose or that their romance was on its wane. Other matters had crowded his mind during these weeks and the part that was concerned with Rose remained undisturbed. She still seemed to him an important figure in their world,—one whose smile and favor remained desirable. No one mentioned her name to him; he was too preoccupied to note the significance of this omission.

Gossip concerning the Dupagnys was everywhere, though

it did not penetrate to Cleve's ears. Laurence Dupagny was slipping downhill. He had been slipping for years, but now, suddenly, every sustaining crevice was cruelly removed from his clutching fingers. He could not find a prop anywhere. For years he had been performing actively in a crowd, deceiving every one with the pretense that he was one of them,—then he found himself alone in a circle of mocking faces, miserably trying to stand without aid and failing.

Without troubling to analyze him the men he had always counted on turned uniformly away. They knew that he had lost heart, but what they said was that he had never been a safe man,—too optimistic, too impressionable. They remembered scores of schemes he had fathered, all of them quickly burnt out, shallow, insecure.

People who had been a little flighty with the handling of unexpected money derived from war speculation became accustomed to it, settled into harness and looked around for safe investments. Laurence Dupagny had nothing of this character to offer,—everything in which he was interested was fantastic and extravagant; a marsh to be reclaimed at immense expense was more attractive to him than legitimate tableland. One by one his hopes crumbled to dust.

Cleve Harkness would have learned of this long before he did, had he been a visitor to the house on Armitage Street, but this had been given up in the early stages of his affair with Rose. Both imagined that they were hoodwinking the public by this transparent subterfuge. In reality their careful avoidance of each other lent importance to the most trivial encounter which happened to be witnessed by an audience pretending to see nothing.

"My dear, they meet *everywhere!*" whispered little Mrs.

Porter, who had been Rose's most intimate friend, "like servant maids and policemen. She has been seen in the most impossible places."

"My maid Jessie who lived with her when it all began says that the telephoning was continuous,—every morning, directly her poor husband left the house," Nina Tyson contributed in her deep, disapproving voice.

The town was talking, but the full weight of its censure was not yet laid upon Rose. Could she have recalled a tithe of her old spirit she might even at this late hour have retrieved the situation, restored herself to the easy leadership of these stupid women, none of whom possessed the courage to do battle with her in the open; perhaps she might even have rehabilitated Dupagny and saved him by the magic of her own charm, but she could do nothing. Numbness lay like a weight upon her; she tore her mind from its personal problems with difficulty; the world was slowly going to chaos about her and she could not stay its destruction.

Cleve did not know that the Dupagnys were no longer asked to the little intimate parties at the club or in certain houses, but Miss Plumey knew, and though wisdom restrained her from open intimacy with her one time friend, malevolence drove her to secret visits, carefully timed. She knew that in the quarter to which she aspired, this would be condoned in return for the bits of news she could be able to furnish Rose's detractors. She slipped into the Dupagny yard through the hedge one September morning, wrapped in her mother's pink knitted shawl.

"I had to come in and tell you about the tea for the Morrell girl," she explained, when she found Rose still dawdling over a coffee cup. "The decorations were beautiful, but poor Cecilia couldn't get her hands white. They looked like lobsters among the cups." She paused,—after all her heart

was not wholly bitter, "Why didn't you go?" she ventured, "Mrs. Morrell mentioned you."

Rose shrugged. She was wearing a lace negligée, a little frayed here and there; through its cobwebby surface her thinness was apparent.

"What would they have talked about if I had been there?" she murmured with a swift, disfiguring sneer.

Miss Plumey was startled. It was not her intention to be led into open discussion of Rose's unpopularity. She looked at her companion reproachfully; the remark seemed to verge upon indelicacy. She was trying to show sympathy, but it was too much to expect partisanship from her. Retreating slightly, she threw the onus upon Laurence Dupagny.

"Pappa says that every business man has his ups and downs," she said, in false consolation. "The pursuit of wealth always has its bitter side, but you shouldn't give up like this, Rose. It makes people think that matters are worse than they are."

There was soundness in this, but Rose could not explain why she had ceased to care. She shook her head sadly but not unkindly, and her visitor went on, approaching the subject she longed to explore.

"You won't think me curious, dear. I am so anxious to see you do well and be happy again,—and I was wondering if Peter Withrow ever put any money in Mr. Dupagny's improvement scheme."

"Peter Withrow!" Rose flushed dully. The association of the name with her thoughts gave her a guilty, trapped feeling. She tried to speak with indifference. "Peter? Oh, no! It is impossible to interest Peter in anything. Laurence soon gave up trying to get him into anything good."

"Really?" Miss Plumey exclaimed acrimoniously. "There

are some things he is interested in,—tremendously. That girl in his office! What a creature she must be! First it was Cleve Harkness and now it is poor Mr. Withrow. They are seen together openly. He even goes to that dreadful boarding house where she lives,—I saw him there myself,—and I have Mrs. Miller's word that he was *drinking* at the time."

Rose betrayed a flash of animation impossible to conceal. This was the same informer who had brought her the story of Cleve's adventure with the unknown girl, and this had been at the foundation of many of their half quarrels which gradually grew more bitter and significant as their meetings became less frequent. How foolish she had been if this was true! She was ashamed at the swift relief she found at the substitution of Peter's name.

"She must be a charming person," she forced herself to say, with an air of indifference.

"One of those dangerous, quiet girls," confided Miss Plumey in a low voice, as though she feared being overheard in a matter that was not quite delicate. "I knew her in school years ago. Her family was once fearfully important, but of course, nobody now . . . you know that . . . Peter Withrow would be foolish to marry her! I imagine she soon found out that Cleve Harkness was not the wedding ring sort . . . though you never can tell. Of course you have heard that he has bought the Pendleton place?"

Rose disguised her sudden trembling by lifting the coffee cup to her lips. A tide of swift emotion rushed to her heart. "The Pendleton place?" she repeated stupidly. "Why should he buy that?"

Miss Plumey assumed an air of wisdom subtly freighted with sympathetic understanding. She now had the conver-

sational ball exactly where she wanted it and, thinking over every move, she began to play warily.

"Ah! Because he couldn't be serious with a girl like that doesn't mean that he won't marry *somebody*. Pappa's so up on politics and he says there is nothing Cleve Harkness couldn't be, now that he has money to back him. He could go to Washington in time, but of course there must be a beginning. The first thing is to become a citizen with a wife and a home,—that sort of thing—respectability. Pappa says that Mr. Wickersham has already been talking to him about it,—sounding him out, you know. They need a clever young man to represent the county. The very first thing was getting him away from Peter Withrow's influence! Pappa says Cleve doesn't have to be told anything twice."

"No?" Rose stood up, signifying that she would permit her caller to go without protest. She was physically unable to hear more, though she longed to know everything, all the lies, the innuendoes, the baseless speculations; but measuring her strength she found herself unable to cope with the poisonous venom behind Miss Plumey's smile. "Let us hope that he will find some charming girl to share his good fortune," she said mechanically.

Cleve was aware of the interest the town took in his purchase of the old Pendleton place and this added to his satisfaction in possessing it. One of the first dormant longings that sprang to life after the acquisition of his substantial wealth was the desire for a home of his own. Having known only cramped quarters during most of his life, his thoughts turned naturally to the farthest extreme. He wished for wide spaces and lofty ceilings; wanted what he had never had,—the sensation of touching elbows with a generation which had never suspected his existence.

When he set out to buy his house he might have had any of the new stucco edifices which were springing up all over Cresston for half the money of his actual purchase, but the possession of the old-fashioned mansion, associated in his child's mind with the palaces of kings, had a charm with which no newer grandeur could compete. There was no mystery connected with its purchase as his audience supposed; his reason for buying the place was as inexplicable to himself as to others. It was probably the first uncalculated act of his life.

Antonia learned the news with glowing eyes.

"Then it will not be torn down, after all!" she exclaimed eagerly. "I have always been afraid of that. The new houses on Armitage Street have barely room to stand on, poor things, and the Pendleton house seems so greedy. Its wings spread over two big lots."

"I expected you to feel like that," Cleve answered gratefully. "No, I shan't pull it down. There is something opulent about it,—something magnificent and independent. A man living between its walls would have to be successful. The house would accept nothing less. I shall live there and see what it will do for me."

Antonia looked thoughtful. "Yet the Pendletons were not successful, or the house would not be sold. Living in it did not keep them from going downhill." She was thinking of her own family and how they had clung to greatness while their roof crumbled above their heads. Somehow Cleve's sophistry sounded childish and immature; she felt, as she often did, his superior in age and wisdom. He was about to try to live romance behind which she saw the grisly truths.

But Cleve scoffed at retrospection. "That's because they didn't know how to live. They kept themselves old, like the

house, and humanity is the one thing that cannot afford to be old-fashioned."

It was late afternoon in hazy September. The day had been hot and still, but now the evening was coming like the calm smile of a wise mother. The air was filled with peace, —the restfulness that is the aftermath of brilliant hours. In the golden glow that was no longer sunlight Antonia's dark hair gleamed like a crown. Cleve's hand closed the book, where her gaze had been following the printed page without grasping a meaning from its abstruse phrasing.

"You look so tired," he said, then began to beg whimsically, "come with me to see my house. It is the first house I have ever owned. Let's build it over without touching a shingle."

She put on her hat obediently and Cleve locked the door as they passed out. The last time they had walked together seemed to have been years ago, and now an unaccountable tremor shook him so that his hand trembled on the lock. He did not guess that Antonia was trembling, too. There was a sort of freedom about this emotion that was strange and new. If people met them walking together it did not matter. He felt alone with Antonia and in a rush a thousand little things came back to him, bewildering with familiarity. When they were children they used to have long serious talks together upon unchildlike subjects, walking along dusty roads outside the town. This walk suddenly reminded him in an overwhelming way of those days when it had been customary to consult Antonia about everything. It became the most natural thing in the world to be going to see his new house in her company.

Like all the important places in Cresston, the Pendleton house was on Armitage Street only a few blocks from the Square,—much too close to the business district to please

those fastidious persons to whom the sight and sounds of commerce are distasteful. When the house was new it had been the center of an estate, now it was only a large, square, pale brown stone mansion, crowded uncomfortably by smart bungalows and stylish colonials; protected by its wide elms and ancient rose trellises, it retreated in dignified seclusion from all encroachment of the newcomers. The Pendletons had sold their lots one by one and when such sacrifice would no longer stem the rush of disaster they sold the house. In the lonely dignity of its proud, shuttered windows, turned emptily to the street, there was a reminder of the humility that belongs to the very old who must dwell among strangers.

As the two young people turned in at the gate, the house seemed to welcome them. In spite of their youth they could remember its past. The failing afternoon sun touched the frowning façade with a faint radiance and the old house seemed to say, "Come, my children, my roof will cover you."

Antonia, standing on the broad flagged walk where the grass had pushed its way through every crevice, looked up at the sightless windows and read this message, but to Cleve the sunlight on the brown face of the house meant nothing. In the time-stained shingles he saw only a record of Pendleton improvidence.

The garden, small as it now was, had become a place of impenetrable depths. It was impossible to explore more than a few yards without coming against a dense green wall, and the imagination was taxed to grasp the fact of the Tracy's white bungalow, full of children and dogs, crowding against the wall from the other side. The place was a riot of old-fashioned rose bushes left untrimmed for years and sending out from their dying trunks long green creepers

to trail through the heavy headed grass, where here and there a gorgeous bloom, child of old age, glowed like a perfect jewel set in decay. Under the trees it was dusk, blue and fragrant, and somehow harboring a suggestion of the dying year that had crept in here to linger in waiting for the shortening of the autumn days.

"We can't explore very far until some of these old trees and shrubs are cut away," said Cleve, looking dubiously at his white flannel trousers.

"Not the trees,—oh, no!" Antonia pleaded.

He laughed. "Oh, well, then. . . . You are like your father after all, Antonia. You will never be thoroughly modern while you love an old tree."

They laughed over this, and Cleve found the house key on his ring as they went up the stone steps that were worn into faintly hollowed grooves. As the double doors swung back and they stepped across the threshold they turned instinctively toward each other. In the fleeting glance that passed between them there was the first warning of the rushing tide that was to come,—as the light picks out the dazzling white of an incoming wave upon the blue breast of the sea.

Then it was gone and they turned to the faded walls of the old house,—its dusty, echoing floors, the cavernous depths that yawned from above where the ancient carved and winding balustrade of another day blindly pointed.

Antonia stood in the hall as she had stood outside on the flags, looking about at emptiness that to her was peopled with countless forms and voices. "Where have they gone?" she thought.

The Pendletons in their flight had abandoned a few remnants of furniture and these had been moved into the long drawing-room where they were left in awkward atti-

tudes, like helpless people congregated unhappily together. But the echoing floors were bare, except for the dust that covered them like a gray veil, and the tall, dim mirrors, set in panels of dull flecked gold between taller windows, seemed to multiply these piteous cast-offs until the room in bare, mocking grandeur, resembled a fallen king dressed in a mendicant's shirt.

Cleve made Antonia sit in a green painted kitchen chair.

"It's a good house yet," he said, with a calculating look at the dim frescoes high above. "Paint, new furniture, and those old shutters taken away and burned, will make all the difference between a home and the morgue. It's a better investment than any new place run up in a hurry by highly paid labor, anxious to be on with the next job." He laughed triumphantly. He felt himself to be cleverer than other home makers who had passed over the old Pendleton house with its indestructible heart in favor of glistening new structures.

But Antonia did not laugh with him. While acknowledging that he was right she felt the disillusionment of his intention. It was as though a frail old book was to be put into a garish art nouveau cover. But she said nothing. Little by little the strong virile sweep of the living man's presence dominated the formless atmosphere of the past and the spirit that had welcomed her there lost shape and being. Through Cleve's eyes she saw the dust, the need for paint, the sweep of light and air that would recapture youth for the old house.

They were sitting side by side now. The green wooden chair had been exchanged for a garden bench, oddly incongruous furniture for the dignified room. The heavy shutters clamped everlastingly let in so little light that night

seemed almost upon them. Cleve had taken off his hat and his ruffled hair absorbed what little brightness was there. He looked young and boyish,—for a moment he had slipped back into the youth which he had barely tasted in his haste to accomplish manhood. Antonia felt an impulse to touch him caressingly as she might have done years ago when they were children. But though she restrained this he must have read something of it in her eyes for he leaned closer to her saying eagerly:

"What is it, Antonia? You want to say something to me."

She laughed; the spell was broken. "No, no," she protested in slight confusion, "I was only wondering—what will you do with this great house on your hands? How can you live here alone?"

From another woman this would have been a direct challenge, and his answer, adept and evasive, would have closed the door upon the delicate thing that was growing so swiftly between them. But in her eyes lifted to his face there was nothing but limpid questioning; a complete obliteration of self as a factor of his future. There was something humble and meek in the way she stood aside from him, not venturing beyond the threshold of his life, and Cleve was touched in his most vulnerable point by her simple acceptance of a minor rôle in his future.

It was not in the least what Antonia had meant to say,—the words formed themselves merely as a cloak to cover the intention of her eyes, but to Cleve it was like a child's puzzle over which his hand had been hovering in uncertainty for a long while. With amazing simplicity the answer spread itself before his eyes and he knew at last what the thing was that made complete happiness and which until

now had eluded him persistently through his successes. This was what he had builded for, and what the unmeasured dreams of his heart stood for,—to sit beside Antonia in this bare, dusty old house, peopling it with a thousand fancies, new and strange and inconceivably sweet. All the time, the wasted time, he had forgotten her. she had lain sleeping in his heart, waiting to claim her own. Other images which had banished her were banished in turn; he saw only this path to which other paths had been tributary, giving their tiny importance to the most tremendous importance of all.

He had no words to tell her all this. It seemed that she must know without the poor medium of speech and know it in a fuller, broader sense than words could clothe. . . . He lifted her chin, cupping it gently in his closed fingers and turned her face upward.

She met his eyes with her own dark gaze, sweetly serious but untroubled. She, too, knew suddenly that this had been waiting for them a long time,—that the uncertainties and doubts had been only preparation and a part of the veil that hides the inscrutable future. All of her hopes and aims dwindled to tenuous dreams before this force that was so strong and so old, like the motive power of a thousand lives that had existed before this one. She felt no regret, no shame in the sudden abandonment in a look, of the principles she had set upon an altar and worshiped falsely. Her dreams had all been pretty lies and this was reality.

And after they had looked into each other's eyes reading the answer to the mystery, now so simple, they leaned to one another with an impulse of exquisite tenderness, giving each to the other the measure of all this new and untried emotion that overwhelmed their hearts. They loved, and

with such love there is no time, regret, or reproach. To Antonia with her lover's first kiss upon her lips, life assumed a meaning remote from anything that she had dreamed and she looked at it with wonderment, forgetting like a child the lessons she had known so well yesterday.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN a town like Cresston where no one is so meek or lowly that he is not linked to the highest by lines that are invisible but complete, it is impossible for scandal, whether founded upon truth or surmise, to exist without its tentacles touching one and all with the poison of its existence.

The undercurrents of the town seethed with the whispered innuendo which dares not name and therefore damns more conclusively. The germ of truth behind the original statement becomes swollen and distorted by the accumulated venom it was asked to conceal. Like the poisonous adder it turned upon the hand that nurtured it and friends of long standing who had trusted found themselves watching each other with suspicion and malevolence. And though this scandal, frightful as its imaginary details had grown to be, concerned those to whom the majority of the babblers were unknown, it was this class that kept it alive, feeding upon the poor defense set forth by those who, claiming kinship with the unnamed victims, felt called to champion members of their group even while condemning among themselves.

Mrs. Stevens, whose plum jelly, safely stowed upon her pantry shelves, did not reconcile her to money paid for fruit which had been a cheerful gift to others, listened to a chapter of this fragmentary gossip while she tried on fall hats in Irene's Specialty Shoppe on the Square.

"Thassay it has about ruined Miss Donnally," some one was saying in the booth next to the one where Mrs. Stevens

was surveying her image in a plum colored velvet toque, "although her shop is downstairs and it's only shirtwaists and neckwear, really,—and a little lonjeray. People are afraid to go in. Thassay one man in this town *dared* his wife to cross that corner of the Square. He threatened to get a divorce if his name was brought into it. Poor Miss Donnally, she has my sympathy."

Hearing this, Mrs. Stevens lost interest in the toque and other toques. She was not an experienced shopper and she tried desperately to remember where Miss Donnally's shop was located, all the while pretending to hesitate between two articles of headgear that meant nothing to her. Her spirit was fluttering pleasurably, conscious of being on the verge of a discovery which had cost her nothing. Where had she seen the name "Donnally" or heard it mentioned? She was acute enough to know that there was a connection somewhere between her mind and this name which was more important than the mere repetition of vague stories that might be entirely without interest to her or her kind. Finally, when she had driven her rather turgid mind to extreme lengths, she remembered. There was such a shop in the Sheridan Building on the first floor. She recalled the gilt lettering on the window quite plainly, and the pink silk chemise thrown carelessly over a dark purple hassock, in plain view of all the gentlemen whose legitimate business took them to the office building.

Women of Mrs. Stevens' sort do not consider such shops seriously. To her it was as unnecessary as one of those places in inland cities which sell steamship tickets for passages around the world. No one ever saw the customers who went into the Donnally shop, just as trusting ticket buyers never see the ocean until unbelievable adventures have befallen them. Mrs. Stevens, having located the

scandal of which she had not been unaware, got up dizzily, forgetting that she had come to Irene's to buy a hat. She was only anxious to get away and made some mumbling excuse to the person whose indignant duty it was to put away the articles she had been examining. She was not in the mood for a hat that day and in resisting the temptation of Irene's artful mirrors she felt as though in some obscure way she were preserving her virtue.

As she went out of the shop she noticed that in certain ways its atmosphere catered to what was careless in a woman's moral character, and she resolved to confine herself strictly to department stores after this, for Irene's, in a far lesser degree, partook of the delicate suggestiveness of Miss Donnally herself.

Mrs. Stevens' back was stiff as she walked toward home. She had always known that such places as Donnally's concealed other motives than their wares, and she told herself that she was not surprised, but she had never pictured such possibilities as the whispered conversation in the neighboring booth had revealed to her strained ears. In the midst of her enlightenment she recalled the bit of transparent pink stuff and a dull flush of vicarious shame stained her cheeks. Her uncontrollable thoughts transposed it to an impertinent and brazen flag, flaunting the secret signal of some nameless iniquity sheltered beyond the gilded security of the window.

She had heard no more than innuendo, but in hearing this had learned as much and as little as the rest of the world knew.

And this scandal, secret, insidious web that it was, reaching out, touching, and forever uniting itself by faint but unbreakable cords to whatever object it might encounter, enmeshed the interest and the sly, malicious thought of all

those persons who, certain that they could not themselves suffer from exposure, hoped continuously for a dénouement.

And as is the way with all scandal, those most concerned were the ones who heard least of all this; some of them heard nothing at all, until messengers unwinged, but bearing resemblance in fantastic ways to Mrs. Stevens and her ilk, brought the sorry news, real and imagined, to their doors, beneath the guise of humble friendship.

As she unlatched the Christy's gate, Mrs. Stevens remembered with justifiable pride that the hay and grain business had proven itself a paying one, in spite of the irritating number of automobiles on the streets. She compared herself, not unfavorably, with the family she was about to visit. To her simple mind it all resolved itself into words of one syllable. Her Joe was a man who knew when he had enough of anything. If he failed to make money in the poultry commission business, he dropped it like hot cakes, and went a little deeper; barley and oats paid if broilers did not. All as easy as A B C, and the children were growing up smart and well dressed, going along in school with the best. At the Christy's the palings were dropping from their fence with dry rot,—their daughter was a nobody, leaving home like a common girl to work in an office, and now this story about the Donnally woman's shop!

"Being a mother myself," she finished the story she was recounting to Mrs. Christy, "I knew about how you'd feel, having your daughter going into such a place every day. I've always been against young girls living out and away from home, and I always will be against it. Thank Heaven, nothing like that can ever come to one of ours,—Joe Stevens is a forehanded man, and I hope to see both my girls safe and married in homes of their own, long before they're as old as Antonia. No doubt this Miss Donnally has a

mother somewhere who'll ache when the truth is known."

In the effort to assimilate the tangled continuity of her visitor's story, and, at the same time, to defend herself from a secret attack to which she was without clew, Mrs. Christy faltered behind the valiant front she presented to the newsbringer. With no time to adjust her faculties, she clutched at the simplest fact in the arraignment.

"And what has my Antonia to do with the goings on of that Donnally woman?" she demanded, meeting Mrs. Stevens squarely. "She's not behind a counter, thank you, and her clothes I make myself, with my own hands. I can't see the connection at all," and to prove this she laughed light-heartedly, as though Mrs. Stevens had been jesting and she had discovered this in time to rob the wit of its point.

But Mrs. Stevens, though totally unaware of it herself, was a schemer of the highest order. She at once began to explain in the most indulgent manner the sordid usages of a window which shamelessly displayed a single subtle garment devoted to a certain kind of woman,—not of their kind.

"I heard it with my own ears," she concluded finally, "no husband who has heard about this, allows his wife to pass the Sheridan Building, even in daytime. A nice place, I should say, for a young lady who respects herself to be working, thrown in daily contact with such creatures!"

Both ladies were approaching heat in their remarks, but Mrs. Christy was most successful in maintaining a light attitude.

"Nonsense! What's the harm in one little chemise when Lowenbaum has his windows full of everything?" she scoffed. "I do hope you're not so narrow as that, Mrs. Stevens, and thanks very much for being interested in

Antonia's welfare, but I'd ask you to remember that my daughter is both a Christy and a Saltwell, and with my four sisters, there was not one of us who couldn't walk barefoot over thorns and nettles without a scratch of suspicion. You're very good, Mrs. Stevens, but the fact of this Donnally woman being what you say she is, cannot affect my daughter in any way that I can see."

The engagement was over. Mrs. Stevens was defrauded of her sensation, and there was nothing but retreat for her. She had hoped to wipe away her neighbor's tears; but her ministration had been rejected. There might have been some gratification for her in the knowledge that, with the first opportunity for escape, Mrs. Christy hurried into her things and went scurrying through the streets to Mrs. Miller's boarding-house, where she meant to wait until Antonia returned even if her household schedule was thrown into chaos.

On the way she repeated constantly in her own mind the indictment which had shown itself Medusa-like behind the false condolence in the other woman's eyes. There was nothing in it, Mrs. Christy assured herself with vehemence. She had not passed her life in Cresston without knowing how baseless half the talk really was that came to life and died in the town's millinery shops, but she knew as well, with heart-freezing conviction, how damning was the power of this same baseless fabric of lies.

Antonia was at home, though it was much earlier than her accustomed hour of returning. She was sitting by the window that looked out on a colorful mass of maples turning hourly to unbelievable golds and red browns. Her long hands were folded in her lap, and she did not turn her face as the door opened. It is possible that she heard no sound. But when her mother spoke she lifted her eyes from

their contemplation and the older woman had the impression of looking into wells of illimitable depths where the darkness captured and held two miraculous fragments of light from all the light in the world.

"What is it, mother?" Antonia asked presently when they had looked at each other in silence and it seemed necessary at last for one of them to speak. In spite of her abstraction she spoke in an awed tone. She was vaguely apprehensive beneath the accusation or question she read in the eyes that searched her own.

Mrs. Christy sat down, breathing deeply. She had almost run through the streets to reach this room, but now she saw how foolish she had been. Nothing was changed or altered; Antonia was the same. The mother's arms trembled with the desire to clasp her daughter,—to thank and bless her for some unspeakable reassurance,—to prove to herself, by the mystery of contact, that the child she loved was still her own as she had been, years ago, upon her breast. But she only began to repeat the story she had heard in the disconnected phraseology in which it had been told to her.

Antonia barely listened; it could be seen that this meant nothing to her. When it was over she only said dreamily:

"Oh, mother! Who do you think has bought the old Pendleton place? Cleve! Cleve Harkness. He is going to restore it. It will be the most beautiful house in Cresston."

Mrs. Christy shuddered. "I shouldn't want to be there when it is being torn down. . . . The deaths that have been under that roof! And with old Saul's spirit to join in, groaning over the money being spent—"

Antonia was obliged to laugh, though her mind failed to follow the processes of her mother's. She could not under-

stand the rapid transition from tragedy to mirth that made Mrs. Christy what she was, and now her merriment was of short duration. Without warning, her eyes blurred over with tears. Emotion fell upon her features like a delicate veil, extinguishing familiar lines and altering her whole face until it became a new face from which a strange, new Antonia looked. She faltered; "Oh, mother! I am glad you are here! I am so happy—so happy!"

"Antonia!" Mrs. Christy sat up, electrified. "What has happened? Tell me—"

"He loves me!" said Antonia in a whisper.

"Loves you? Who? Tell me—your mother! Has Peter Withrow—"

"Peter? No. Cleve—"

Mrs. Christy was dumb only for a moment. "Do you mean that Cleve Harkness has proposed? Are you engaged to him?"

"Engaged,—no. He—he—loves me," Antonia repeated in a bewildered tone. She was bewildered because her mother did not seem to understand what was so plain to her. Her mother could not grasp the miracle of her happiness, and because it was so rudely handled it was suddenly slipping away. She began to awaken like a sleeper disturbed in a delicious dream, and this change was helped by the alteration in Mrs. Christy's face.

"You must come home with me," her mother said, rising, with an intonation of command, totally unlike her usual voice. She continued, with growing harshness, "Come. The place for you is under your father's roof. I always knew it would end like this. Love! You have allowed a man to speak to you of love and not of marriage? My daughter!" She was trembling convulsively. Her feeling seemed out of all proportion to its cause, unless it was considered that Mrs.

Stevens' communication had sunk deeper into her consciousness than she knew and now returned with added and sinister force. The hints and innuendoes which had been ignored that afternoon were suddenly fraught with powerful warnings, all of which contained a modicum of reason. In spite of the restraining voice of conscience she added sternly, "How far has this gone?"

Antonia was looking at her in alarm. "But you do not understand, mother," she said, trying to be calm. "Nothing is changed. There is no reason why I should return home like—like—a prodigal. I will not come."

If Mrs. Christy had been asked to put her thoughts into words the task would have been impossible. In bald language she might have shrunk abashed from the pictures imagination conjured, the dreadful prognostications incubated from fear; but, having no words, her mind recoiled in silent anguish from the abyss of fancy that tormented her. "I will see your father," she managed to say.

It was late, past the supper hour that was as inexorable as one of the Commandments. Darkness had come on suddenly and the streets were filled with a faint unfriendly wind that sent regiments of leaves racing before it; they had not been softened by time and rain, and they clattered against the pavement like fine hail. The night was threatening, without a sign of storm, for the stars were unnaturally strong and cold. It was a rare experience for Mrs. Christy to find herself alone in the streets on such a night, but she had no fears. Rather, she was strengthened by some mysterious force that came from all this wildness to blow upon her spirit. She could have run on and on for interminable distances with this strength in her heart. She did not recognize it as the exaltation of a divine love that breaks all bounds at hint of disaster to the one who is loved.

To her the wind meant only freshness,—the deceitful energy which autumn brings with its wild starry nights.

She turned in at her own gate at last. The house was dimly lighted and when she passed around the ell to the side porch she caught a glimpse, through the shadeless window, of her husband standing in the center of the cold, inhospitable kitchen surveying its emptiness. Before this she had always been there.

He looked at her frowning as she entered. "I have been here for half an hour," he said.

She put her hat aside and with it the light cape she wore and began the mechanical supper tasks with apologetic haste, for although the empire of her heart might fall, the men and children must eat.

She was too wrapped in her own turbulent thoughts to notice that, contrary to habit, he lingered in the kitchen door, or that he was watching her face as she went about her work. Donnie slipped in for a drink of water, and, observing his father and mother in this unusual companionship, hastily vanished. It could be seen that something menaced, a power to destroy was almost visible in the homely room where a thousand homely deeds had been completed.

But presently through her abstraction Mrs. Christy became conscious of the somber regard of her husband. This espionage disturbed her, caused her to spill the coffee she was carefully measuring,—finally forced her to involuntary speech. Without looking at him she said defiantly, "I have been to see Antonia."

The name was like the opening of a barred door. He came over to where she stood by the stove and they faced each other across the steaming coffee pot and the hissing pans. It was necessary to speak in raised voices to be

heard over the miniature tempest of a meal in progress.

"You cannot go there any more. The girl is disgracing herself. She is disgracing all of us," he said in a harsh voice.

"That is not true. Antonia has done nothing wrong. It is you who are hard on her. You have always been hard," cried Mrs. Christy, trembling all over with the intensity of her restraint.

His face changed. Opposition from her was too unexpected and rare not to have the result of slight demoralization. He had expected her to be satisfied with his command and her rebellion forced him into unintentional revelations.

"She spends her time among men as no modest girl would,—it was young Withrow for a while, and now it is Harkness,—old Saul Harkness' boy whom I picked out of the gutter and taught to read. You don't know everything. . . . Yesterday—yesterday—I saw them coming out of the Pendleton house together. I saw my daughter—my daughter—and the Harkness boy together. He had bought the house—it is empty—"

Mrs. Christy heard a loud voice crying—"Engaged—no! But he—he—loves me!" Her heart seemed to be contracting until it wounded her. But she lifted a lid and examined boiling potatoes with exaggerated care.

"They played in that yard a hundred times together when they were children," she said, with the sprightly calm used in conversing with Mrs. Stevens. "Why shouldn't he show it to her now, if he's really bought it?"

He turned away frowning upon her levity. "You understand? You cannot go there after this. There can be no conditional surrender to her course. She is not my daughter —not yours."

This was ridiculous. She wanted to laugh but the surge within that had sent her flying through the windy streets forbade laughter. Instead she said quietly:

"She must come home, Roscoe. She is not old enough to judge for herself. Maybe you two can get on better after this."

"But I say she shall not come back here." From the doorway he turned on her violently, his face slowly purpling. "When she left this house it was for all time. No Christy woman can walk the public streets—"

A door shut between them. She heard his feet echoing distantly on the boards of the uncarpeted hall. The walls of the house seemed to draw in until her body was cramped for room to breathe. She went to the window and flung it wide open and the wild winds came hurrying in and played havoc with the draughts of the stove and with her hair that was unaccountably damp and clinging about her face. But it only felt free and sweet to her as she leaned against it. "I am her mother!" she cried fiercely to the wind.

Donnie had bread and milk on a corner of the kitchen table that night. He washed his hands without being told to do so, and, red and shining from buffetings by wind and water, he watched his mother surreptitiously between mouthfuls. Finally he could endure the void between them no longer.

"Ain't you goin' to eat supper, Ma?"

"Not now, Donnie, I'm busy."

"What you want to iron for, Ma,—nobody irons at night."

"I must get these things finished before morning,—" Mrs. Christy had pulled garments from a closet, sprinkled them and now she bent over a board, furiously pressing with an iron so hot that the cloth it touched sent out an acrid smoke.

She worked swiftly, covering long sweeps with the bold strokes of her iron and the smooth lengths fell magically from her hands. Donnie watched her, forgetting to eat, and presently his silent scrutiny pierced her consciousness which had ignored his right to share in the coming catastrophe.

"Donnie, would you care if we went away from here?" she said, when the little boy had nearly finished his supper. She went on in the wheedling tone that mother's sometimes use to their sons of any age. "Don't you miss your sister, Donnie?"

He resented this gruffly. "'Course I miss her," and he began to look for his cap. He revolted from inquisition and a sense of injury was born. His mother knew and he knew that he missed Antonia and that was enough.

But there seemed to be no end of prying to-night.

"Would you care very much if we went away from this house"—Mrs. Christy continued in a dim voice—"and stayed somewhere else—where your sister could stay with us—for instance?"

Change has the eternal lure for youth. Donnie's exit was arrested—his momentary twinge of regret for the gang who might be abandoned. . . . "All of us?" he questioned unbelievingly, "Pa—and all?"

". . . Not your father. He'd have to stay—to look after things—"

Expectancy fell flat. Donnie had no way of looking into the minds of older people but he possessed intuitions. With increasing frequency the air castles of his childhood were tumbling down. Big things were becoming small and unimportant events, such as his mother's ironing at this hour and scorching cloth without comment, were assuming proportions which perplexed him. When he heard that his father was to stay behind on this problematical journey, he knew

that his mother's proposal was based upon nothing real—she was only playing the old game of "if."

"Guess we wouldn't go very far," he said flatly, and dismissed the subject. "Say, Ma, I want t'go over to Brownie's fer a little while. I won't stay out late, hones' I won't."

"But listen, Donnie," she stopped him with a rigid hand and the boy turned back frightened by her earnestness. "Would you rather stay here with your father—or go with me—to Antonia? You just have to say which. I'm giving you your choice. . . ."

People who would weep over a cut finger or a bird's broken wing are always inflicting this unspeakable cruelty upon children—tearing the fragile secret impulses of their hearts from them and forcing their tender loves into the light of acknowledgment. Donnie endured his crucifixion dumbly. He did not know what to say. He was suddenly confronted with an impossible problem and one which had masked itself in the ordinary guise of everyday; therefore it was more incredible and unanswerable.

"I dunno," he said, dully.

"But you must know. You're old enough now to understand. Would you rather stay here with your father?"

Mrs. Christy refused to see that she was demanding that to which she had no right. Her own problem blinded her to the problems of other people, and this was a child's, delicate and scarcely formed within his own heart. She looked into his face, demanding his allegiance.

Donnie had never thought of his father in connection with love; he had never thought of love at all. He was there—the others of his family were there. They belonged to each other. Even the incredible departure of Antonia had not separated them. He saw her every day—nearly. She stopped on the street to dab his face with her sweet smelling

handkerchief—to give him five cents now and then, slyly, so the other boys would not witness the largesse of a woman.

Yet now he was asked to analyze an unknown emotion, non-existent until the present. He was conscious of a feeling for his mother; it hurt him to see tears in her eyes, and he missed Antonia's hands, which had a way of tidying him without wasted moments. But these sensations had no relation to the excitement of his spirit as his mind pictured the scene of his father alone in the house, walking through the empty rooms, sitting before his food, arising, departing, alone!

He looked at his mother in quivering silence—impossible to choose, impossible to go or stay, apart from one of these who until now had been associated only with childish needs or punishment. He searched her face for some sign of relenting. He believed until the last that this would prove a hoax or a queer jest of hers to prove his fidelity to her. His own mates played the game of "choose" and it meant nothing more than strength of numbers. Reassured he smiled at her wanly.

"I knew you couldn't stay away from me," cried his mother, choosing for him. She spoke in the low crooning voice that belonged to his babyhood. She was innocently convinced that he felt no tie stronger than the tie between them.

Donnie did not go to play that evening. It was already eight. Night had begun to come far too early.

In the morning he had forgotten. The wind had stilled in the night; the sun was shining calmly. It promised a day as hot as July. Thick white dust lay upon everything after the blowing of yesterday and gigantic piles of leaves in every fence corner were the harvest of the wind. There

were millions more upon the trees that were still green but the fallen warriors were of every hue and of every tortured shape.

When he had once looked upon this world Donnie could barely wait to dress. Vistas of time must elapse before recess; centuries until the closing bell released him and his kind. Before that time interference might create havoc in the playground arranged by his friend, the wind. He dressed feverishly.

Breakfast was there as usual, the white cloth and the sun shining strongly in the window. But what was this?

His father was there, sitting in his place, but not eating, not drinking—it was like another morning weeks past when he had not eaten or drunk. His mother showed a more surprising change.

She was wearing her best dress and hat at breakfast time on a school morning. She did not even sit in her place. Over by the door was a large bamboo suitcase, bulging. Across this impossible scene Donnie's memory grasped at last night and the things she had said. What if it was no game, after all?

She was speaking. "You see, I've got to go to her, Roscoe. I can't let them talk freely about Antonia. I've got to be there behind her. If you won't bring her home—"

"She left home of her own desire. If you side with her against honor—"

"You shall not say that!" cried Mrs. Christy sharply. "The dishonor lies at the door of those who think and speak evil! And even if it was true—if she was *that,* I'd have to go—she's mine—mine—mine——!"

His mother was crying. Her face which he was used to seeing in smiles was twisted into a strange likeness. This was not the mother he knew, a woman who was so

strong that the biggest question resolved into nothing in her hands. . . . Her tears seemed to fall upon his quivering spirit, releasing it to tremendous endeavors. He looked belligerently at the man who caused these tears, but there was nothing fierce or cold in his father's face to-day. He was gripping the tablecloth as if it was something strong which could sustain him by its fixity. For the first time he was not afraid of his father; he sensed in him a weakness matched by the weakness his mother showed. If Donnie had possessed the power to put his feelings into words he would have said to them, "Lean upon me," but he was a child and did not recognize the power that tried to find utterance through his puny body. He heard his father saying in a queer voice that thrilled him as his mother's weeping had done.

"But you were mine first, Mattie. . . . First. They came afterward. You're tearing it down."

"I can't help that," sobbed Mrs. Christy. "She's my first baby that lived—nothing can change that. I never thought such a thing as this could happen, but you might have known. My great aunt, Louisa Saltwell, walked right through the Yankees, root and branch, and woke up a general in the middle of the night, stopping at nothing until she got to her boy, lying wounded behind the lines. I could do that and I will. You won't suffer for anything, Roscoe. I'll come over every Friday and bake the bread and see to things, but I've got to go to her now."

Donnie was prepared for resistance from his father and was surprised when none came. He was wholly on his mother's side now, and was ready to resist if commanded to remain. He was sure that some danger menaced Antonia which he was called upon partially to avert and his father descended the scale in proportion to the help he withheld.

But he was not called upon for manifestation. Nothing happened. The figure at the head of the table remained quiescent and Mrs. Christy took up the suitcase and opened the door. Outside Donnie began to sniffle and pull away.

"Aw, wait, Ma. Can't you? I didn't get t'tell the fellers good-by. Lemme whistle t' Brownie, won't you? They'll say I'm a quitter."

"Be quiet, Donnie," said his mother in a strange, hard voice, "we're only going a little way. You'll see your friends every day."

His exaltation diminished as his feet lagged. Five minutes ago he had been a knight, now he was only a small boy reluctantly following a woman. Like everything else, the importance of this change became nullified with realization. He was defrauded as he had been defrauded a hundred times, by the inexplicable failure of people to live up to their promises. It would not be fair to say of Donnie that he was disappointed in the dramatic failure of this finale; his mind was too immature to plan, but he had been prepared for greater sacrifice than this. He sought for a key to the incomprehensible occurrence, but found nothing that explained it. Reviewing the scene, he knew that he would have chosen differently had he been unswayed by his mother's weeping—for this was something faintly shameful; a thing he must defend while condemning it in his heart.

There could be no reason strong enough to take his mother to live in another house while her own remained deserted.

The gate closed behind them.

CHAPTER XIX

ANTONIA'S eyes had grown troubled, and beyond this trouble was expectation—the wonder of youth puzzled by the delay of happiness.

Every day she went to the office in the Sheridan Building as usual, performed the duties that belonged to her; read the books that were necessary to her growing knowledge, and when this was over, returned to the boarding-house and to the room she now shared with her mother.

It was amazing to see how Mrs. Christy, the most conventional of mortals, whose bringing up as one of the Saltwell girls had been impeccable, met the situation in which the abrupt desertion of her lifework placed her.

From the first she announced to Antonia that she did not intend to be a "burden" as she expressed it. Antonia's small wage was barely sufficient to provide for her own support, and Mrs. Christy, looking over her resources, chose one of the two occupations which have been the bulwark of needy gentlewomen for all time. . . . She "took in" sewing, and after the first child's gingham frock left her hands she was inundated with orders. Her room was turned into a pink and blue bower where she stitched from morning until night, finding a secret, satisfying delight in contact with dainty materials and pale colors which had been denied her before this. Her customers were nearly all children; small, dressy persons, and in catering to them she was able to carry on the dream of frivolous young girl life which Antonia had refused to enter.

The first day of every week always brought a letter addressed in a cramped script that, in spite of its ugliness, was perfectly legible; when she was alone she would open this, extract the folded check which it contained, and enclose it in another envelope on which she wrote her husband's address in characters fine and delicate as copper plate, using the long "s" in Christy, which somehow gave the missive a Chaucerian effect—as though a careless postoffice had kept it hidden for years and only released it now for the mystification of its modern employees.

The vast alteration which had taken place in the Christy family caused Antonia poignant and secret anguish. It would have wounded Mrs. Christy deeply could she have known how little Antonia was in sympathy with her decision. Nature alone is the prelude to such an action, and Antonia, not having experienced motherhood, could hardly be expected to understand the power that drew her own mother from the anchor of established habit to the defense of her child. But Antonia understood love and thought she had a conception of what marriage meant, and she could not comprehend abandoning one tie for the other. It is the tragic law of creation that the parent love continues long after the new life has turned away to its own gods. But Antonia was, of course, blind and was merciful only in keeping her real attitude a secret from her mother who she believed had blundered.

She was troubled about her father, for almost visibly her resentment toward him was fading into nothingness. She had been unable to gauge the full measure of her own unfaithfulness, but she could plainly see her mother's lack of faith. Without knowing she was cruel, Antonia assumed a vast cruelty in her contemplation of the forces which actuated the behavior of her parents. She could not under-

stand why they felt it incumbent upon them to suffer for her sake, and to interfere with her progress. Why was it impossible for them to see that she was a separate personality; that all their pain was useless and could not touch her beyond the call it made upon her sympathy. And even this sympathy was sorely tried by the pressing of their claim upon her at this time; she felt their hands holding her back, reclaiming her for the childhood she had left behind, and restraining her from the full realization of life which was her due.

But there were times when she felt nearer to her father than she had ever felt; her eyes were seeing new visions every day, and her impatience with his resistance to her growing personality was changing to tolerance, sweet and wistful for his love and approval. As the feminine side of her nature assumed form and importance, she marveled at the seeming ease with which Mrs. Christy broke the bonds of a lifetime spent in service and the simple dignity of a wife, to choose a lowly seat in Mrs. Miller's basement dining-room and the companionship of the people who harbored there.

"You mustn't bother about me, Antonia," her mother assured her every morning, as she sat, rocking gayly back and forth in the sunshine of the neat bedroom, her needle threaded, ready to begin. "This is the first rest I've had for a long time. You've got to admit that things *were* a little behind the times at home—half the pans with holes in them and the eternal grind of housework. It's really pleasant to be boarding, and if it were not for Donnie, I'd enjoy the change."

Only an adept in psychology could have known how much of this was real and how much pretense. Whether Mrs. Christy's volatile side had gained control, or whether she was playing the common rôle of contentment, only she could

say. But Antonia, with the one-sided judgment of youth, looked upon her mother with coldness not to be concealed. She had never denied that housework and leaky pans were distasteful, but coming from Mrs. Christy, this complaint savored of disloyalty. Later that morning she walked a block or two with Donnie on his way to school.

"You'll go back home one of these days," she comforted him. "Father will come and take you away. I know it's beastly, not having the boys come near the place, but a boarding-house isn't home. The main thing is that you mustn't let mother see that you are unhappy."

Donnie had been the principal sufferer from the change, and occupied the unique position of an alien in the austerity of Mrs. Miller's house. In the injustice of this separation from his mates, he had come to a closer understanding with the sister who alone could measure his isolation. It was natural that he should make her the confidant of that which a boy of eleven confesses only to those who are closest to him.

He shared with her the secret that he had already paid surreptitious visits to his home; once he had eaten supper with his father, a supper cooked by themselves and possessing all the qualities of a man-made meal. Donnie described it as a "bully supper," and smacked his lips in reminiscent appreciation.

"Yes, but does he ever speak of me?" Antonia asked wistfully, and the little brother, who was beginning to allow love a recognition in his heart, was forced to say, "No."

"But he will, some day," he added, in order to comfort her. "I'll get to talking about you sometime. I'll tell him how many pretty dresses you've got. He'll wanta see 'em. . . ."

They had come to the corner of separation.

"No, no, you must not tell him that!" warned Antonia in a stifled voice. "He wouldn't want to hear that. We'll tell him something else."

She saw Cleve every day. Their moments together were stolen moments, because Major Bailey had moved a great many of his belongings into the office which Cleve was soon to vacate, and was fussily busy cataloguing books—a task at which Antonia helped him gratefully. There might have been opportunity for longer, more intimate talks, but she held shyly aloof. She trusted Cleve profoundly; the understanding between them was crystal clear and, looking into each other's eyes, they found no shadows there.

But the wound dealt to her delicate first love by her mother's incredulity persisted in its sting. . . . She could not forget that Mrs. Christy had linked engagements and declarations of love into indissoluble partnership. The bloom of her happiness was disturbed by this conventional banality. She knew that she was to be Cleve's wife—that he already thought of her as such, but because he had not spoken of this in words she drew back, afraid.

Cleve, whose soul was as conventional as his boots, was not unaware of this omission, though he did not measure its influence upon the spirit of the girl he had chosen and intended to make his own.

But Cleve was now paying the price of those who exact a tarnished tribute from love instead of the true metal. Before he could build his first hearth fire in the new character, he must put the house of his past in order. A bona fide engagement with Antonia would mean solitaires and a published announcement. This, with his relations with Rose unsettled, was unthinkable. In spite of this new happiness that blew upon his soul like a fresh wind, he thought more and more frequently of Rose. He was amazed to find him-

self thinking of her more seriously than in the time of their early love and, looking the matter over with the dispassionate eyes of vanished passion, he told himself that he had been a fool—the worst kind of a fool. More and more he longed for the honorable calm of marriage and propriety.

Cleve was sophisticated by instinct if not by experience; that is, he could gauge the exact extent of his dangerous experiment and without hesitation choose the proper remedy. He was in love with Antonia; he had actually loved her all his life without realizing it, because he had been too blinded by his passion for self-advancement to think of such love as a possible achievement. But the money left by old Saul had given him a respite; he learned in a flash that the hard road of success need not be for him, and he very quickly reorganized his plans, which included marriage with the one girl who he knew answered to the half vulgar advice of his friend, "a woman you can trust."

His mad passion for Rose was ended; it had completed its cycle and existed no more, but shame for his own weakness continued to exist, and marriage was the one remedy suggested which promised to take the sting from remembrance and salve his self-disgust.

Rose had ceased to send for him or to telephone, and her silence was cause for more uneasiness than messages would have given. His excuse of retirement following his father's death was worn thin, and now there was nothing left to shield him but an unaccountable dread of seeing her, of having to explain what was so simple yet so inexplicable. He wished with impatience, as many another man has wished, that she would look at things sensibly and of her own volition drop back into their old pleasant relation.

Yet as he longed for this he knew it to be impossible.

Rose would never again be the Rose he had first known, who by her sweetness, her brilliant wit and gentle sarcasm had ruled her little world with an unseen scepter. When he thought of this, his dread of meeting her grew immeasureably. He would not admit even to himself that his hand had helped bring her to disaster, but in his heart he knew this to be true.

Dupagny had come to grief. It was no longer possible for his clever tongue to beguile money from pockets where it belonged. He was found out, and like some poor masquerader whose disguise has been pierced, he turned to flee, finding a stone in every hand that once had held a flower. But Cleve, with the clear sighted acumen which in this case was an unwelcome attribute, saw that the real reason for Dupagny's failure was in Rose, herself. It had been Rose all along who braced him by her joyous spirit, her calm defiance to bad luck. When she drooped his courage took wing. She could have upheld him and urged him on until something might have been saved from the wreck, but she seemed to have forgotten him. . . . Cleve, the tired lover, saw nothing in this situation except blame for the woman. He had no pity for her drooping standards; if she had fought back and conquered the fools who were pushing her down she might have held him—not his love, but the feeling she had first won from him, a curious assembling of boyish admiration, a sort of hero-worship, sexless and all the more sincere.

But she had not held her own and now he was with the crowd who watched her curiously, wondering what she would do next.

That she did nothing failed to reassure him. He knew that, however great her collapse, there must be a readjustment when her wings would struggle to regain their freedom.

Therefore he did not speak the magical words that would have bound Antonia's life to his before the world. He knew that she was his to claim when he would, and the joys that were to come possessed in his eyes some of the calm of eternity.

In one of their brief meetings Antonia told him timidly of her mother's decision to live with her for a time. "My father is alone," she said in a blurred voice.

It was singular that Cleve should be one of the few persons in Cresston unaware of the scandal which was coming each day nearer to a revelation. Major Bailey, who must have known, preserved a delicate air of neutrality and contented himself with blundering interference whenever he saw Antonia and Cleve together. He and Judge Christy had once been friends, though there was more than a decade between their years, and the Baileys and Christys belonged to the same past era.

Cleve thought of no explanation for the queerness of Mrs. Christy's step, nor did he seek for one. The answer might have been found in his origin. He saw nothing strange or sinister in the separation of the Christy family—it seemed entirely fitting that Antonia's mother should be with her; the quarrel between father and daughter would be easily adjusted when Antonia became his wife and her hectic fancies had merged into wifehood and motherhood. It was not possible for him to conjecture malevolent gossip with the name he secretly revered, so that he read no meaning in Antonia's tone.

"You must not fret about the Judge," he consoled her, "some day he's going to know what a wonderful girl he's father to."

She looked at him wistfully. She wanted to explain that she was beginning to love her father and to understand in

him what had been hidden from the unawakened eyes of her childhood. But she could not speak of these things without touching upon others which were forbidden by his silence. And she saw in his eyes that he was far from following where her thoughts wandered.

"You must not mind, dear. I love you," whispered Cleve, as though that covered everything.

Peter Withrow was away during these weeks. His absence might have had something to do with Laurence Dupagny's hopeless depression; Peter had invested money in some mad-hatter scheme of the promoter, and, with most un-Peter like perspicuity, had decided to investigate before sending safe money after that which was imperiled.

He sent no word of his return and Antonia was astounded to find him walking up and down the office with nervous strides and an awakened look somewhere about him when she came in one morning. He had come straight from the train; the marks of travel and a sleepless night were there as plainly as his bags piled by the door. Peter was not looking his best; he had not shaved and his face was thin and careworn. He came to meet Antonia and took her hand, looking earnestly into her face with his own near-sighted eyes.

"You are still coming here?" he said, as though her presence surprised him.

She was taken aback. Her fingers, about to remove her hat, slowly relaxed and curled into her palms. She returned his look wonderingly, but beneath the wonder was a glint of understanding.

"You—you—did not expect to find me?" she faltered, trying in vain to speak steadily. "Did you write?"

Peter took a long breath. "No, I did not write," he replied absently. Then he reached for one of her curled

hands and drew her to him until they stood closely together, face to face. "Antonia," he said, "will you marry me?"

She must have been startled. Nine in the morning is not a normal hour for a proposal of marriage, nor is a business office, at the mercy of every intruder, the place for such an event. Antonia was not as accustomed to proposals as a girl so lovely might have been expected to be, and such a development from her relation with Peter was unlooked for. But she received it after a scant space of confusion, with a sweet steadiness that removed all element of unreality from the moment. Peter had blundered unpardonably in offering himself to her under these circumstances; he might have known that she would see through him and demand to know his reasons. He was prepared for it when she spoke.

"Peter," she asked, letting him keep her hands, "what has happened?"

It was not the way she should have answered and it robbed him of his obscure hour and reduced his words to immateriality. Antonia's clear and reasoning brain would not accept this incongruous situation on its face, but he was offended by her plain rejection of his sincerity. He released her hand at once, leaving her to stand unsupported before him.

"I have always loved you, Antonia," he answered simply, after awhile. "Why should you think it strange that I am asking you to be my wife?"

"Peter, Peter!" she repeated and gave a little laugh. She knew that his words were serious, but she could not believe that he was. It was true that she had always known of his love, but it had never impressed itself upon her as a strong emotion. She overlooked the pathos of this love that she refused, in seeking for its origin. But when she

did think of this, her laughter ceased. "I—I—am sorry, Peter," she faltered, becoming trite and feminine at the realization that he offered himself as her husband.

"You mean that you won't marry me?—or that you cannot love me?"

Jest and laughter were far away from them now. Antonia felt a surging desire for tears instead, as though she had wounded something that clung to her. A sort of blankness spread itself between them. This would mean life without Peter; his quizzical smile and slow, comforting words would be absent from her days—for Antonia was not old or wise enough to know that the best of friends are those who have denied themselves to love.

"You love somebody else," Peter stated, his face hardening.

She was instantly on the defensive. Here was another who would try to drag her tender secret into the light. He saw the quick changing of her face and added gently. "You need not tell me anything. I have no right to ask. But my love gives me the right to guard you, Antonia. You must not stay here any longer."

She was stung by that. "Are you like the others? I did not think so. Oh, how can people believe such things? How can they doubt one another—?"

"Then you have heard—"

"My mother wanted me to give up my position here because there were stories going about," she returned, meeting his gaze steadily, "but I refused. Why should I admit, by doing that, that these things concerned me? How does any one know that they are true? If—if—any one has done wrong why should I run away as though I feared contamination—?"

He saw the impossibility of making her understand. She

was determined not to betray her convictions of personal independence. Like all reformers she was blindly and cheerfully putting her strength against the unconquerable.

"You cannot stay here any longer!" he said harshly, giving it up. "Good God! What can Harkness be thinking of? Don't stop even for an hour. You must go now!"

In his effort to right a wrong Peter acted with exaggerated haste and the wrong was confused with injustice. Humiliated, she turned to obey. "You mean that—it is all over? You don't want me any more?"

"Good God!" he exclaimed again, aghast at her unbelief. "Don't you understand? Try to understand! It is for your own sake. I can't make anything plainer. This place isn't fit for you—for a girl like you. How blind I have been. . . . A lot of it is my fault—but I never saw what was plain to everybody—"

She did not wait to take even her small belongings from her desk which had been moved the day before into Major Bailey's rooms. She was about to pass without another word when Peter spoke again in a dull, changed voice, devoid of feeling or passion.

"Will you remember that I love you, Antonia? No matter what happens, that I will always love you—that I will come to you anywhere at any hour—and that my life is yours?"

She could not answer. She was crying softly as she went out the door.

CHAPTER XX

ROSE was surprised one day to hear Nina Tyson's voice speaking to Emily at the door.

"Ask Mrs. Dupagny to come down—or may I go up? Perhaps that would be better."

Rose surveyed herself in the glass, looked at the room which would reveal far too much to the keen eyes of her visitor, and then called over the balustrade, "Don't bother. I'm coming down."

When the two faced each other in the living-room, both found it difficult to make a beginning. Nina Tyson had never been one of Rose's friends and her motive in coming now was not easy to explain.

She was a tall, handsome woman affecting a somewhat masculine pose, which excused her spare, large-boned figure and brusk manners. Her eyes were cold, weary, and dissatisfied—eyes that had never found what they sought and were tired of their quest. She was the distinct antithesis of Rose Dupagny and there had always been an unacknowledged war between the two, a war of clothes, admirers and entertainment. Everybody knew how Nina felt toward her husband, who was as narrow and parsimonious as he was rich, and every one had pitied her except Rose, who had not understood why money was not enough. There had been no common ground between the two women, yet now Rose discovered that it was Nina Tyson, alone of all her set, who was offering help when she was sinking.

"Why don't you pull up?" Nina asked, in her cold emotionless voice. "It isn't too late. . . . We'll stand behind you—we women. I'll make 'em. But you've got to get rid of him first. Nobody can win when they're whipped at heart. This is your chance to come back, Rose."

Rose was huddled in her chair. She felt herself shriveling beneath the hard scrutiny of her visitor's eyes. Although her heart was numb with its continued piteous ache, her pride, fighting feebly, urged her to reply.

"Are you talking about—my husband?"

"Your husband! You know I am not. I mean Cleve Harkness. Good Lord, girl, can't you see how you've wasted yourself on him? He's not the sort to love a woman—he wouldn't try."

"What makes you think—"

Mrs. Tyson moved impatiently. She liked Rose less than ever for her reluctance in meeting advances that were decently fair. But she was able to pity her opponent who cringed under the lash of truth. There was nothing subtle in her make-up and she believed the most merciful course would be to show the facts as every one saw them. So she said brutally:

"You've lost your head like a child that pulls its playhouse down. You think that you're in love with Cleve Harkness and because you can't get him—or can't hold him—you won't accept anything less. You're not a woman, you're a spoiled youngster and if you were sixteen you'd be sent to boarding-school and taught to think about normal things—but being a woman you have free rein to ruin every one who depends on you. Why don't you buck up and save yourself and your husband and show that mucker he doesn't count? Don't deny anything . . . you've been foolish enough to turn a servant who knows everything

loose in the town. . . . You didn't realize that girls like that really hate us. If they are virtuous they hold it over us like a bank book. . . . As I said before, we'll help you—even my brute of a mother-in-law will help. She's promised."

Rose was sobbing; her restraint was broken down, her pride tortured beyond endurance, but with this came a refreshing sensation of activity. The torpor of waiting was demolished; whatever came now must be the quick. But as the picture developed by the other's words unfolded, her courage drooped. She knew that she could never run the gauntlet of those eyes that read her defeat.

"You don't know . . . you've never loved," she stammered, between her sobs.

Mrs. Tyson got up to go. "Perhaps not," she admitted dryly, "not as you know love. But I have felt a lot, off and on, though it never conquered me. It's all a question of temperament, I suppose, whether we're Magdalens or Christian martyrs. But I didn't come here to bully you, though it looks like it. I'm going now, but try to see the right of things before it is too late. Don't let your conscience bother you, my dear. I daresay under the skin we're all ravening wolves, and it's only a thin coat of decency that keeps us from tearing each other's throats. You've dropped your decency, Rose: try to pin it on again and come back and play with us."

Late in the following morning the Dupagny maid of all work, going languidly about her duties, entered her master's bedroom with brooms and dusters and found him still there, clothed as he had been at the eight o'clock breakfast in a soiled dressing-gown, once rich and lustrous, and with a stubble of gray beard showing upon his lean face, as background for his hollowed, desperate eyes.

He was sitting on the edge of the tumbled bed and on the floor before him were spread two or three traveling bags of various sizes, into which he had been folding articles of clothing, awkwardly sorted, as though his hands were acting without relation to his brain. Beside him on the bed were a brief case and a quantity of papers divided into two careless piles. His attention, given to these matters, was undiverted by the entrance of the servant who began her work by flinging open a window whose draught sent the papers scurrying while it cleansed the atmosphere of the odor of stale tobacco with which the room was heavily charged.

But Dupagny was annoyed by the confusion in his work and ordered the girl to leave the room. He spoke to her roughly, and as she was an insolent creature with the stimulus of a month's unpaid wages behind the impertinence she flung at him as she obeyed, he was more disturbed by her voice than by the clean wind. She left the window open and as he crossed the room to close it he swore feebly under his breath. Across the hall in Mrs. Dupagny's room where conditions were no better, she complained bitterly and hinted at leaving.

Nobody could keep a house "straightened" when people stayed cluttered in their rooms for half the morning, she said, and Rose learned from her ill-tempered grumblings that Dupagny was still in the house.

She had tried earnestly to live up to the hope that Nina Tyson held out to her; since their conversation the day before she had made a tremendous effort to tear her thoughts from the sickening round of conjecture which had Cleve as its central figure, and to concentrate on some plan for a future that seemed headed for destruction. She had slept little that night, and, like a person throwing off the bonds of sickness, she struggled to touch something real and

stable that would help her to hold the course she knew was right and sane.

With each day she had clung more desperately to the belief that her love would be justified, but the bald reproaches of Nina Tyson who represented the world, took this fading fetich from her hands. The words, "he never loved you" had a ring of finality. If he had never loved her, what then remained?

She had almost eliminated Dupagny from her thoughts, but when she learned that he was still in the house the old, feverish impatience for his absence asserted itself. His presence disturbed and demoralized her; it was a continual reproach and she could not rest while he was near her; yet apart from this she felt a vague uneasiness at what the servant's words disclosed.

Her own cold coffee stood on a tabouret beside the day bed, where she lay, pretending to read the morning paper that had been brought to her long before and which she would never read. She was staring at the blank columns of black and white, when she said idly: "Does Mr. Dupagny seem—ill? He breakfasted?"

"He was down but he never touched anything." The maid's voice was dispirited. Nothing is more fatal to service than a master and mistress without appetite. Emily took up the uninviting coffee tray and abandoned the morning duties. "When you get ready to go out, call me," she said defiantly.

Rose slipped into a heavier peignoir and took a mechanical survey of herself in the cheval mirror. This was not vanity, but the cold appraisal of a woman whose weapon has been beauty. She knew that other things had failed her and she wanted to see if this asset survived the sleepless hours of the night.

And she was to be disappointed in this. The rose-colored garment she wore did not conceal the sharp and pitiful outlines of her form, though even in its meagerness it was far from unlovely. It was in her face that the tragic alteration had been wrought.

Her features were not less beautiful, but all expression had gone from her face except a fantastic hunger, rigid and wondering. Her eyes were dry, her lips were dry and parted. . . . She dabbed a rouge stick across them, but it only accentuated their pallor; rouge could not blend with the drawn outline, and in disgust she drew a handkerchief across her scarlet mouth. The stain that came with it was hideous and nauseating in the hot sunshine that flooded the room and she flung the stained rag away. "What can I say to him?" she wondered, as she crossed the hall to Dupagny's room.

He was still sitting on the bed, and he looked up haggardly as Rose entered. It was a long time since she had voluntarily come into that room, and, remembering this, a half smile found its way to his lips. He had news which would pay her for coming at last.

"Are you going away?" she asked, looking at the bags, the scattered papers, everywhere but at him.

She had her answer in the look he gave her, cold, detached, as one stranger looks at another because of unwarranted interest in his affairs. "Yes, I am going away," he said, echoing the look, as though words meant nothing.

She lingered in the doorway, not knowing whether to go or stay. For the first time she felt awkwardness in his presence and a sense of fright. He did not ask her to sit down, nor show any interest in her presence there, but continued to sort the endless letters, stowing some away in the brief case, tossing others into an untidy heap on the

floor. She now saw that a steamer trunk had been dragged from a closet and that all of his clothes were hanging about on chairs in formless heaps. She was amazed to hear herself saying timidly: "Perhaps I can help you!"

He paused in his work to look at her, then began unexpectedly to laugh. She was frightened and made a movement to go, but with her hand on the doorknob she recovered her courage.

"Why do you laugh?" she demanded indignantly. "What is there so strange in having help from me?"

Dupagny got up, holding his greasy dressing-gown about him and offered an elaborate bow. There was a sort of wildness in his attitude; his face was a little mad. "I beg your pardon. It was the spirit in which your offer was made which caused my laughter. A sense of humor may be a saving grace; on the other hand it may be misinterpreted."

Words were dragged from her against her will. "What spirit should I have but a desire to help you—?"

"The spirit that speeds the parting—husband, should I say? But my dear lady, why should you trouble now? My goings and returnings have not disturbed you before this!"

She wished now that she had left the rouge upon her lips. It was difficult to act a part when she knew herself at such disadvantage, so haggard, so distraught. Dupagny was watching her curiously, his attention held by her obvious distress. "Why bother, now?" he repeated, dully.

There was something in his resignation so opposed to the sneering reproach of his earlier speech that a chord, long mute in her heart, was touched. With an impulse of pity she spoke to him in an altered tone. "Larry, where are you going? Has anything happened? What does this change mean?"

Dupagny resumed his seat upon the bed and clasped one of his knees between his hands. The dressing-gown slipped aside and his leg, clad in pale blue silk, was exposed. The delicate color was faded to yellow in spots from careless washing and there was a large, frayed rent through which his bony knee protruded. Nothing could have accentuated the demoralization of their household and their relation as this trivial flaunting of neglect betrayed it. He had forgotten his interest in packing to watch her face change with every uncertain thought and the movement of her slender body, swaying by the door, uncertain as her thoughts. He smiled when he saw her eyes upon the torn garment and she remembered in a queer kind of relief that it was not really her fault. She could not sew and this was one of the duties that belonged to the maid, whoever she was.

After a long pause Dupagny answered her repeated question, but with deliberation, as though the time had come to explain everything and he wished to make his words count. "Much has happened," he said, gravely, "and the change means, in a few words, that the end has come."

"You mean that you have failed—"

"Gone to smash. Withrow got back from Colorado this morning. I had a night letter from him and he followed immediately. I believe he's a good scout after all. He wanted to give me a chance to make my getaway before I met him and the other stockholders. He knows it's a clean loss. They can't recover anything from me. The boy dropped twenty thousand himself, but he's a good loser. He doesn't want to send me over the road."

This touched her. "Could he do that?" she whispered. She had never come so close to the truth before. He had always lightly concealed the thin ice from her careless eyes

and she had never known, because she preferred not to know. It was easier to take what had come so easily, without questioning. She had relied on Dupagny's cleverness without admitting reliance to herself, but now the danger unfolded like a sinister script. "Could they send you to prison?" she faltered.

"For twenty years," he responded crisply; then smiled when she gave a little cry. "Ah, that hurts, doesn't it? To be known as the wife of a convict! You couldn't stand notoriety or social disgrace, could you, Rose?"

Her eyes drooped in spite of her effort to face the taunt boldly. "I was only thinking of you. It would be impossible to imagine you in prison."

"But entirely probable if I don't get off before Withrow makes his report," he said dryly, beginning his work again in a matter-of-fact way that made her excitement seem exaggerated and ridiculous.

Already he seemed to have forgotten her and she took a few hesitating steps into the room. In spite of the estrangement which had endured between them for a long time, she could not understand this ignoring of her now. She had always been first, and a lesser position with him was incredible. She had taken his love for granted for so long that to find it replaced by a dull indifference puzzled and diverted her from her train of thought.

"And what of me?" she asked in a low voice when he did not speak. "What is to become of me?"

It was the moment he had waited for. He flung it straight at her quivering lips. "That is Cleve Harkness' affair, isn't it . . . not mine, any longer."

"Oh—" she shrunk away, hiding her face in the curve of her arm like a child that had been unfairly struck.

Dupagny's chin sunk on his breast. He did not enjoy his

triumph as he had expected; after all his words had fallen flatly on a woman who could not strike back. When he spoke again the rancor had gone from his voice.

"I need not have said that. You'll have enough to suffer, poor girl. . . . But you have maddened me. . . ."

She began to sob. His softened tone did not heal the wound, but his pity brought tears to both their eyes.

"We have both suffered—but how could it be helped? We do not make ourselves."

"No? But we can stop when we see ourselves going wrong. I could have stopped long ago, and that would have saved you. It has not all been your fault—"

His sardonic mood was laid aside like a silly paper mask, and with his new purpose some of his old dignity returned; even his unshaven face ceased to be repulsive. He began to pace the floor slowly, passing close to where she stood with her face half hidden.

"I will tell you everything," he said presently, in a labored voice, as though he dragged the words from some unplumbed depths of his spirit. "I am starting for New Orleans to-day and from there I shall take ship for South America. Any boat will do. Fugitives cannot choose their route. The second important thing I have to say is—I do not go alone." Seeing her uncontrollable start, the shadow of his abandoned mood returned to play for a moment upon his features. "Not you," he corrected, "another woman."

She lifted incredulous eyes to follow his endless progress back and forth.

"Another woman. What did you expect? Did you think that I would knock forever at your door? Did you think that your cold smile that could warm for others would not chill my heart until some day it would seek for warmth itself? Poor little Rose, you have prided yourself on know-

ing men and on your foolish play that is no more play for you than for other women. And I believe you have lost, my dear." The immeasurable sadness of his voice robbed his words of any bitterness they might have held. "It is very sweet to be warm when you have been out in the cold so long. She is not beautiful, like you, but she cares! By God, she must! There could be no other reason for throwing herself away on a hulk like me . . . ruined, discredited, with only enough to get to another country. She must care! It's miraculous. And she is young,—a good girl, too."

"It is the girl in your office," said Rose, in a flat tone, "I know. She looked at me as though she hated me."

"Perhaps. Why shouldn't she hate you? You had everything, and had thrown away everything which she would have given her life for— Just as I hate men who have opportunities and let them slip, while poor devils like me sweat and suffer and lose for want of a few dollars and somebody's trust. . . . I haven't been dishonest,—it's only that I didn't have *enough* of anything,—not enough money, or credit, or confidence. . . . And women like this girl are not dishonest; they only take what other women toss away,—a poor, squeezed carcass that they believe can be built up again . . . the best they can get for their poor charms. . . . They want a man and babies,—and women like you want neither. Why shouldn't they have what they want?"

Rose was unmoved by this. She felt only a sullen loathing for the unnamed woman; a paradoxical desire to condemn her. "It is she who told you—" she said coldly.

"Right. She told me a lot about you and Harkness. Malicious, of course, but feminine. Naturally, she would fight. But she is not to blame for all the talk. Your own friends have helped things along."

"And you are leaving me for this—this—woman! You dare to tell me the details of your affair—you have discussed me with her?"

"Only when it could not be helped. . . . Remember she has rights as well as yourself. I have no wish to hurt you unnecessarily, I only want to tell you what you will hear from every one to-morrow. Come, Rose, we are not children. Let us talk this over calmly. You cannot claim jealousy or the rôle of the wronged wife after what has been. . . . But after all, this is unimportant. It is the cause behind all this which you and I should discuss. Why should this be? What could have remedied it?" He spoke musingly, as though the matter were impersonal, concerning any one but himself. "I think if we had based marriage on a sounder foundation it might have stood the wear better. When I look back upon what has passed the ceremony of marriage appears to be merely a license to do as we pleased. Nothing sacred, nothing sacrificial. . . . God!" He stopped in his restless walk, facing her. "What did we ever think of but easy money; putting it over on our friends, trimming everybody who trusted us and using this house and its popularity as a trap to catch our flies? What sort of a foundation was that, I ask you? Built upon lies, it couldn't last. Now it's falling, Rose. I'm getting out and you must look for yourself, my girl!"

"You are deserting me!" she gasped, struck by the significance of his last words. "What will become of me?"

"You don't trust him, then?"

She cried out at the insult as she had wept before, and Dupagny was astonished at her emotion. He himself had passed beyond the delicacies of speech into the bigger issues. He had meant no taunt; it seemed to him the simple questioning of a fact, important to them both, and her passion

appeared both fraudulent and childish to him. "We gain nothing by this!" he said with a touch of impatience.

She no longer felt the inclination to tears. The crowded moments left no time for consecutive thinking. She saw herself to-morrow, crowned with the shame of desertion,—a desertion that pierced her heart as well as her pride. How her little world would laugh! Dupagny's crimes would be overlooked in the keen appreciation of his revenge. But as she turned away her head did not droop nor her shoulders bend. The rose-colored peignoir fell in straight folds from her neck to the floor; her lifted chin sent a curve to her hollowed cheek. In her complete defeat she held to the one thing she had left; in her destruction she did not lose the dignity that belonged to her.

"Rose!" Dupagny cried as she reached the door. His hand closed upon hers as it touched the knob. She saw the sweat upon his forehead and under the stubble of his lips. He repeated her name in sudden-born anguish. "It is not too late! Come with me, Rose. See, the tickets are here,—you can go, you can escape it all if you wish. I can't give you up! I will forgive everything,—I will forget!"

For a moment a ray of sweetness swayed her heart. He meant that to-morrow she might be far away from all this and free from the pain that ached in her breast eternally. So far away that even she might learn to forget! Then as she pictured this, her eyes met his.

"You mean that I am to take her place?" she said slowly.

Desperate passion conquered his abasement. "I mean that," he cried fiercely, "you are to be my wife,—my real wife, mine to do with as I will . . . the possession they call a chattel. Not a dressmaker's dummy or a plaything for other men as such women as you have been and are. . . .

You are to be mine utterly, heart and mind, body and soul, you shall belong to me as you have never belonged and we will build upon that union, which is the only ground strong enough to hold our future. . . ."

She was afraid. She gave a low scream and struck at his hand, freeing her own. His face confronting her threatened her with abysses of degradation that were like dim fantasies, too frightful to be seen in their entirety. She saw her soul, stripped of its secret trappings, suffering in his brutal grasp. All this was in her eyes.

"Then, go!" he cried with an oath and thrust her through the door.

She was in her own room, in the midst of the staring sunshine with the unmade bed and the delicate, untidy finery lying about. She looked on all sides of her, trying to recognize the place as though she had been apart from it for years.

"I can die!" she whispered with her closed hands shutting this out, "I can die!"

CHAPTER XXI

SHORTLY after luncheon, Cleve Harkness drove his glittering new car to Mrs. Miller's door and asked for Antonia. The machine created a sensation in that modest thoroughfare if the owner did not, though he came in for his share of admiring consideration. There were few who did not remember when he, himself, emerged from that doorway to make his way with the rest of the humble population to the corner where the trolley stopped. The new car owed its importance to the miserliness of poor old Saul, buried weeks ago, with all his piteous economies laid bare to the world, but if Cleve could claim no credit for such possessions he deserved commendation for having chosen a father who, by crucifying his son's childhood, managed to provide so magnificently for his maturity.

The morning hours had been full of annoyance for Cleve, for following Major Bailey's announcement of Antonia's departure to return no more, came the knowledge that now he must face the issue with himself, and he had been indulged by chance for so long that it irked him unreasonably to be asked to make a choice of two courses without time for deliberation. Then in the midst of this came the summons he dreaded,—the voice of Rose Dupagny, calling tremulously across the wire. She said very little, but he gained an impression of the trouble in which she was turning to him.

He promised to call upon her later in the day, and this promise, made to a woman who refused to step out of his

life when the time arrived for her exit, had its influence in bringing his decision to a close. He began to be angry at the unconscious part she played in his day. When he saw her he would have taken the irrevocable step; then she would be helpless to affect him, except as she injured herself. His quick mind seized upon and executed a program that would advertise his stand to the world, and his call at the Thelma Avenue house was the first move in a rapid sequence of acts that, he believed, would relieve him forever of unwanted ties.

Antonia came down, pale and starry eyed, in answer to the summons. In her heart she had longed for the justification of his coming, and now to find him anxiously awaiting her was dear relief and consolation.

Cleve himself was pale and there was an unwonted gravity upon his features which erased somewhat the boyishness and exuberant youth that was so much of his charm.

Major Bailey, describing Antonia's dismissal, had taken a fussy delight in the communication, seeing in it a checkmate to the upstart who had made half the women in Cresston mad about him. But Cleve saw far more in the circumstance than this. He read in it a determination on Peter's part to force him into the open, for he knew that Antonia would now expect his championship as she had the right to expect it, and that if he was to keep her love he must not withhold this right. He had not yet encountered Peter, nor had he sought him out for he felt the conviction that a meeting between them then would be to Peter's advantage,—and he meant to be triumphant when he next saw the man who had been his friend and was now his enemy.

He asked Antonia to drive with him for half an hour and she accepted the invitation without reflecting that in tak-

ing the seat beside him she was creating consternation, delight, and envy among those who watched the progress of the automobile from the vantage of curtained windows. Without knowing it Antonia had crossed the Rubicon that separates the persecuted working girl from the willing victim. It depended now upon her alone, which station she would occupy in the mind of the public.

But Cleve knew. He had deliberately chosen this method of announcing his loyalty to her. With a sort of cynical satisfaction he drove straight to the Pendleton house which was now the Harkness house, and stopped before it. The place was slowly assuming a new character. Men were busy demolishing the overgrowths of the grounds, and, in and about the house, carpenters and painters were at work, tearing down and rebuilding. The shutters were no longer closed. Light and air and sunshine were penetrating to the frozen heart of the deep rooms from which the garden bench and the green painted chairs had been banished. But in spite of this new freedom the uncurtained windows bore a look of desolation, mute and tragic, as if they now gazed with open yearning for those who would never return.

"We will be happy here," said Cleve, as if he stated a fact that was familiar to both. "That will be your room, Antonia, the one that extends over the drive. In summer there are a million roses on that trellis underneath, and when you wake in the morning you can step out on that little balcony and choose the color you love the most. I hope it will always be red. I want you always to wear brilliant colors,—you have had enough of gray."

Her face had color enough to please him then, but her eyes lost their starry look and she did not smile under the half serious, half playful raillery of his voice. It was not the setting which any woman would have chosen for the

important love scene of her life, and Antonia was not different from her sisters. A strip of pavement and lawn alone separated them from the hearing of a dozen workmen; people were passing along the street, some of them looking with open curiosity at the splendid new car, and the two young people in it, sitting before the Pendleton place. Many of these passers-by knew Cleve, and a few recognized Antonia as old Roscoe Christy's daughter, and all of them smiled and conjectured over the absorption of the pair.

"We'll live all our lives here," said Cleve. "That old place will stand for ages. By Jove, I must order a new stone for the front."

Against the curb was the gray, furrowed block from which the name was almost erased, and which had been used by Pendleton ladies of bygone years as a mounting block to help their mincing feet to the carriage step.

"Except for the look of the thing, I'd not have another," mused Cleve, "but it gives a sort of dignity. I'll have 'Harkness' cut so deeply that it will never wear away." Suddenly he turned to Antonia, and took her hands. There was a look that approached exaltation on his face. He looked deep into her eyes, reaching to her spirit through the material folds that separated them. "Our children will play among these trees, Antonia. They will run through that house and over this grass. They will not be afraid or cold or ashamed. . . . They will love us and we will love each other in each of them—"

Antonia closed her eyes with a slight sensation of shock. Her head whirled a little as though she had been looking at some dazzling object. The swift alteration of their intangible relationship and the ruthless tone of Cleve's masterful statements snatched her fancies from girlish dreams and thrust her remorselessly into reality that dazzled with

its procession of possible events. She was conscious of an indefinable repulsion so incomplete that to call it by such a name was unfair. She was bewildered by her inability to share his mood; it was as if she had failed him without knowing why, in something that was his best,—offered to her and rejected, why, she could not say.

Cleve was disappointed, too. His exaltation had fallen flat, and he missed the sympathy he confidently expected. But in a moment his natural conceit asserted himself and he attributed her lack of response to the convenient excuse of girlish shyness. This reflection helped to heal whatever hurt he knew and in the end created an added tenderness in his feeling for her. She was not like other women, he knew, nor did he wish her to be.

The new car slipped easily along the smooth pavement. Not all of Cresston's streets were asphalted, but the main arteries were in as perfect condition as the state of public finances permitted, though the little side streets, where less important people lived, were left to smother in dust until a fresh impetus was given to taxation. There had never been enough money and now that money promised to be forthcoming from a subdued public, there was no labor to be had. Here and there were barred streets, with signs forbidding passage placed in front of them, and piles of rock and gravel and idle engines, all dust covered. There was small pleasure to be found in driving about Cresston, but in the country were long, pleasant, tree-shaded vistas where lovers could be alone.

Cleve remembered too late that he would be forced to pass the Dupagny house unless he retreated ignominiously. This he would not do. The car was so new that possibly Rose had not seen it and it might pass unnoticed. And

even if she saw them together, so much the better—it would make the explanation to come later much easier.

And Rose did see them. She had been waiting for him since one o'clock and though it was then barely three, centuries seemed to have passed. "Surely he will not fail me now, when I have asked for his pity," she thought, when she heard his voice, cool and reasonable, answering her own. She fancied that already the whole town knew of Laurence Dupagny's defalcation, and that he had gone, leaving her behind, taking with him another woman to share his exile. In telephoning Cleve she had obeyed an impulse half hysterical, half desperate. Her pride had been so beaten down that she could make even this humiliation serve as an excuse for claiming his attention.

Dupagny left the house shortly after their talk without seeing her again. Locked in her room, she listened to his lagging feet descending the stairs and from her window saw an angle of the taxicab which waited to take him to the station. It was ironical that she could see only the engine of the car, and that Dupagny's haggard look, directed at her window, failed to reach her.

When the noise of the motor was lost in the noise of other passing vehicles, Rose turned back to her room with a rebounding sense of freedom.

This experience, then, was ended. She was a deserted wife, widowed, as the law would not hesitate to declare her, when the extent of Dupagny's misbehavior became known. Her swift revulsion of feeling was false and misleading, as hope mounted in her heart. The mere fact of Dupagny's absence, which destroyed the tie between them forever, helped to dissipate the depression which had become unbearable.

It was in this unnatural state of exhilaration that she summoned confidence to telephone to Cleve, but at the sound of his voice her spurious courage deserted her and she fell to trembling so that her voice was husky and full of tears when she stammered: "Come to me. I need you."

She called to the servant who, after the manner of her kind, was preparing to vanish at the warning of disaster. At the last Dupagny had grudgingly paid her overdue wages, and, softened by this, she was ready to champion the cause she had insulted that morning. She obeyed the summons of her mistress, but stood sullenly in the door, poised for flight, if she should be asked to perform an unwelcome task.

"There will be a caller presently," said Rose. "Will you see that the living-room is in order,—it is Mr. Harkness, and you are to admit no one else."

The woman smiled knowingly. Her stay in the house had been short, but she had made friends with neighboring servants and they had not left her in ignorance of what they called "the goings-on" of her lady.

"Will Mr. Dupagny be away long?" she asked insolently. She believed that the wife was taking instant advantage of the disappearance of her husband to arrange for a meeting with her lover, and in her tone was both contempt and familiarity.

Rose twinged beneath the question. She could not read what was in the other's mind and she thought that already some inkling of the truth had penetrated even to this ignorant creature. This was the first gibe, or so she thought, and she schooled herself to answer as she would be expected to answer on a thousand occasions.

"He has gone on a long trip," she explained simply.

But she saw that Emily was not interested in her reply.

The insolent eyes were searching the room, prying into closets that were filled with dainty clothing; making an inventory of the rows of shoes and slippers and the hats upon their pegs. Suddenly she remembered that money must be owing this servant as it was to every one, and this had the effect of dampening her spirits for a moment. Until now the thought of money had not presented itself in its various guises, and she was instantly aware of the necessity of placating the claimant in the doorway. She could not be left alone in the house, and there was no one she could ask to stay with her.

There was very little money left in her purse. Later this would be remedied. With the optimism which Dupagny had taught her, she trusted to a supply from unrealized sources, but this did not supply the present need, and she had a wistful desire to right herself in this girl's eyes; the witness to her humiliation and ignominy.

A dark blue cape with a deep squirrel collar hung at the door of the closet. She took this garment from its hook, and folded it in long soft lengths. Rose loved all her clothes and this cape had been a favorite.

"I am sorry that I have not the money for your wages," she said gently, "but perhaps this will satisfy you. It is nearly new and worth very much more than the sum owing to you."

The girl was taken aback; she had not suspected that the trouble between her employers had reached this extent, but she was quick to see and seize her advantage. The closets were full of beautiful garments, many of them much more to her taste than the dark blue duvetyn cape. She permitted her insolence to increase as she looked at Rose and her offering.

"You needn't expect me to take your wornout duds in

place of my good money," she began loudly. "If I'm to take secondhand clothes for my wages, I'll take something worth while. That purple suit there, an' some of your silk underclothes, an' stockin's might suit me, if you want to do the right thing."

Rose turned away. "Take them," she said in a frozen voice.

When she was gone, bearing her spoils, Rose had a return of her depression. She now saw how impossible it would be to live on in the town which was to witness her complete downfall. She would have to go somewhere, to some large city, Chicago or New York, and hide herself among strangers for a time. Yet how could she go when she had no money? There were only the furnishings of the house left and these would have to be sold before she could escape. It was about this she meant to talk to Cleve when he came. She was determined to talk sanely to him that afternoon. There would be no tears, no reproaches. Already there had been too much of both.

While she dressed she rehearsed speeches in which she was once more the self-contained, delicately cynical Rose Dupagny who had ruled her friends daintily. . . . The little play was successful except when she thought: "It may be for the last time—the last time. Perhaps directly afterward I shall go away. Surely we could not part upon such terms as these!"

She made a careful toilette. Excitement brought back some of her beauty and softened her features with a natural glow. She applied the rouge delicately, disguising it with careful little strokes and blending it into her skin with other creams and powders. She wore a different face than the one which had met Dupagny that morning . . . now such ages ago. She had not tried to be beautiful then, and it was

not her beauty which he had tried to hold. She shuddered, remembering her parting with him.

She chose her prettiest, gayest frock to wear that afternoon; she was determined to carry out the rôle she had chosen to play, and experience had taught her the long heralded lesson that men dread and dislike tears and gloom in a woman—even in a deserted woman. Her gown was a delicate color and she chose pale gray satin slippers to wear with it. When she was dressed she looked like a gorgeous gold and crimson poppy swaying on a pale green stem, for all her exotic beauty had rushed to her aid. The triumph of recapturing it elated her extravagantly; only her hands were cold and she shivered now and then. It was autumn, and, though the Indian summer sun outside held burning heat, the shaded house was chilled with the premonition of winter.

As Rose left her room and went down the shallow stair she left behind her an impression of finality; she might have been leaving the shelter of her door forever. An impulse had caused her to lock both the lonely rooms staring emptily across the hall at one another. To-morrow she would begin the tasks of packing and dismantling the house, but to-day she wanted its secrets to sleep behind closed doors.

Downstairs the darkened living-room smelled of dust and stale flowers, and Rose, remembering it as it had been, could not bring herself to enter the place. When Cleve came they would open the windows, but she shrunk from facing the ghost of departed happiness alone. There was no better place to pass the moments before he came and she went hesitatingly into the deep porch that was still shaded by wistaria vines, approaching dissolution like all the green life out of doors, but with form enough still to shield her vigil.

People were passing; cars were rushing back and forth,

but none brought Cleve, though it was past the hour he had promised to come. Miss Ethel Plumey in a new fall costume strolled past and, seeing Rose standing there, yielded to the temptation of speaking to her. An hour before she had received the first hint of the freshest Cresston scandal, the elopement of Laurence Dupagny with his office girl,—an unknown person who suddenly became famous. Miss Plumey could not forbear sounding Rose upon this subject, and, in learning how much her one time friend knew and suffered, became herself the purveyor of added sensation.

At the sound of her voice Rose hastened down the walk to meet her, in dreadful fear that she had become telepathically aware of Cleve's intended visit. She would have refused had she dared, or taken refuge in the house, but she knew how futile this would be. Miss Plumey could not be disposed of in this fashion and would not have scrupled to follow, prying with her protruding pale eyes until she had learned everything.

But when the two women met there was no sign of this derangement upon their faces. Their greetings were as insincere, as casual as they had ever been. When this had passed, Miss Plumey said, "What a shame you couldn't go with your husband upon his wonderful trip. How could you bear to miss it?"

Rose answered: "I loathe traveling. And we are not rich. We couldn't do it as it should be done."

"Luckily *all* women are not so particular. Are you quite, quite sure it was safe to let him go so far away, quite alone?"

Rose was still brave enough to battle with an adversary like this.

"You can never tell about men,—especially husbands. It is best not to inquire too closely."

She managed to rid herself of her tormentor after what seemed an age, and returned to the wistaria screen. Miss Plumey had left the sting of bitterness behind her, and the excitement of anticipation was fading into the familiar, dull torture of suspense. The chill of the house followed her into the brilliant sunshine. She shivered.

A flashing automobile, startling in newness of varnish, glittering trimmings, low and luxurious, rolled noiselessly past. The man and woman who occupied it were almost hidden by the cramped windshield and the low, flat hood. The machine gave an impression of attempting to slip past unnoticed, almost with guilt, as a dishonest man evades his creditor.

But Rose's eyes, quick with pain, unbelieving, yet stricken with belief, were not to be denied. Nothing could hide him from her, not distance or movement, or the impossible vision of another woman between them.

He was not coming. He had forgotten or he had done this with intention or unwittingly! Her mind leaped to a hundred conjectures, all equally unreal and filled with unspeakable pain.

Another woman! At the hour when he should have been with her, he had chosen to be with another woman,—some one who held and charmed him as she had done one time. She needed no second glance to assure her that it was Cleve, —but she could not be certain of his companion though the outline of the drooping head beneath the simple hat was vaguely familiar. She ran forward a few steps, forgetting that she herself might be seen, to gaze searchingly after the disappearing car.

Strangely enough she lost the familiar sense of pain for the time in the overwhelming desire to see their faces. . . . If she could meet them face to face, let them see her scorn,

her indifference! She felt oddly lifted above the ordinary emotions of jealousy and despair. Her heart was wrung dry of everything but curiosity; she was as curious as Ethel Plumey!

But the car was gone and she was left stranded upon the dreary porch with the empty house behind her. No use to wait, he would not come now! Her mind, unnaturally clear, leaped to a remedy for this. It was possible to see them again if she ran very fast!

Two blocks further the paving was being repaired and he must turn into one of the side streets. There was a succession of vacant lots which she could cross to reach a high bank from which she could gain a long and unobstructed view. If the car made slow progress she could intercept it here.

In frantic haste, her whole body strained and palpitating with the violent desire to reach the bank, she ran through the shabby street behind her own house, leaving the uncertain sidewalk to run in the edge of the street itself. But with all her effort she made little progress. The high, delicate heels of her slippers turned, threatening to throw her; the satin strained and cut keenly into her flesh. Obstructions came into her way,—little things, such as fallen branches and round pebbles,—playthings of the wind and of the astounded children who gazed wonderingly after her flight. A violent pain began in her side and scorched her body from shoulder to thigh. . . . She came to the vacant lots at last and here a narrow trail, ankle deep in dust, led straight to the high bank. The burning summer had stripped the place of grass and now it was arid and desolate, but the path marked a wavering line. She ran along this path, letting her light dress trail about her unheeded. Her hands were outstretched, her lips slightly parted.

The bank was there in front of her, but the path ended at its base. There was no foothold but that which she could make herself in the brown, unfriendly earth. Holding to dead grass roots; on her knees, stumbling, slipping, but making a sort of progress, she stood on the bank at last. It was a dreary place, covered with upthrown debris, broken bottles and discarded tins. Summer had survived here a little longer than on the ground below, for long, dead gray grasses waved mournfully in the freshening breeze and helped to hide the desolation beneath.

The street beyond stretched like a smooth pale river, and, as she gained her footing, the glittering car was just passing with slow and insolent leisure. In a moment its speed increased . . . it was gone. . . . The faces in the car eluded her as before.

She turned to retrace the way she had come, forgetful of the figure she made outlined against the sky. She looked at the dizzying thread of path across the lots far beneath her; then at the descent which now seemed sheer and precipitous, yet inevitable. From this to her swollen feet, which had begun to burn and torture her. The little gray slippers were twisted and broken; the delicate satin burst and frayed. The soles rasped with sand and minute pebbles and her thin stockings were in rags, inadequate to protect her flesh from a thousand fierce stings of weed and pollen. She began to climb down the bank and to do this she had to use her hands to hold on as she slipped lower and lower, sometimes with her face against the earth. Finally this was over and she stood again in the open ground, ankle deep in the agony of the dust.

CHAPTER XXII

CLEVE and Antonia did not prolong their drive into the country. Poor Rose would have been spared some of her despair if she had seen them turn back after a half hour spent in the silence which had submerged their earlier happiness. Antonia's mood was a strange one. To her moods were simple phases of sorrow and joy and she did not analyze them.

And Cleve in mystification found himself influenced by her silence until he, too, fell silent, and by unspoken consent turned the glittering car, which had been unable to communicate its magnificent satisfaction to them, in the direction of home.

In Thelma Avenue the sensation of their departure had not been dissipated. Those who depart must return, and spectators who had not witnessed the beginning were on hand to see the end. Cleve was annoyed by the invisible, staring eyes which he knew were looking at them.

"Thank God, we shan't have much more of this!" he said, as he opened the door for her.

Antonia asked him to come in and speak to her mother, but he begged off with a hurried and negative excuse. The raw edge of his nerves would not be improved by Mrs. Christy's conversation, and for the last ten minutes he had been thinking of the appointment with Rose which he had evaded and forgotten. He decided that this must not be put off any longer and with his ugly mood growing upon him he resolved to see Rose before further time passed.

His love for Antonia was as unselfish as any impulse he had ever known and for the moment was strong enough to assert its importance over his self-contemplation. As they were about to part he returned to her side and blindly reached for her hands, unconscious of the publicity of their station. She was startled by the intensity of his action but when she looked up she read something in his eyes, so changed from the gay confidence she knew, that to question his design was impossible.

"Antonia, do you love me?"

Unlike any lover who ever existed, he had never asked this question before. He had taken her love for granted as he took everything that came to him. And Antonia had taken it for granted, as well. But now, hearing it put into irrevocable words, she was suddenly dismayed. Love was so final. She sent him a startled glance and drew away, not answering, and this broke the spell. He laughed, tossed her a gay, affectionate smile and ran down the steps to his car.

He was not offended by Antonia's coldness or lack of response. Instead it increased his pride and his extraordinary satisfaction in possessing her. Her coldness fed his desire and withdrawal emphasized her importance in his eyes. The easy capitulation of the class which he had believed so important had completed a readjustment of his judgments. He was now able to see that men and women are merely men and women, in any case, and that his conquest of Antonia Christy was worth far more than the conquest of another woman whose fancy had been given elsewhere before his coming. It would be too much to say that he had put Antonia upon the pedestal which is the inalienable right of about-to-be-married mankind; no one would ever occupy that enviable position quite as he occupied it, but he was con-

tented that Antonia should reserve her emotions until she belonged exclusively to him. In that way she became more precious, more exclusive.

Thinking of these things, he turned his car unwillingly in the direction of Armitage Street. He would see Rose, if only for five minutes, but his resolution to tell her the truth began to fade into uncertainty. He excused himself for this weakness on the score of Laurence Dupagny's catastrophe. Like every one else he had heard an incomplete rumor of this and believed himself charitable and kind in sparing the woman additional worry. He had been so far from really loving Rose that he was incapable of estimating the actual part he had played in her tragedy. He already thought of himself in the guise of a sympathizing friend, offering consolation for a disaster he was powerless to modify.

But his stop at the Dupagny house was without result, for though he found the door ajar, his impatient ring remained unanswered. Then after a moment's wait he pushed the door further open and cautiously, like an intruder, took a survey of the interior. He saw at once that the house was empty and that it would be useless to ring the bell again. In quick relief he closed the door hastily; he had done all that could be expected of him; he would not wait.

But, as he turned to go, a feeling of extraordinary depression fell upon him. The house, once so gay, so full of color, seemed to have been shocked into silence; there was a waiting pause about the place, as though presently, waking from its trance, it would begin to feel and live again. As he went hurriedly down the steps, the vagrant leaves that covered the lawn began to scurry in tiny battalions here and there, some of them mounting to the veranda, where the chairs rocked back and forth with the quickening wind.

It was late in the afternoon when he returned to the office in the Sheridan Building, which he found deserted as it had been most of the day. He had no further interest there. Several days ago his belongings had been removed to the rooms he still occupied in the adjoining apartment, and the stamp of the pompous and methodical Major Bailey was upon the place. His mail lay in a cold little heap beside the telephone, on the desk that had been Antonia's, and this he took up and went into his own apartment, closing but not locking the communicating door. Suddenly tired, he sat down in a reading chair beneath the wide, yellow lamp and began to open his letters.

None of them was important, though he was obliged to read all. People had already begun to write to him about investments; temptingly ridiculous offers that reminded him of Laurence Dupagny's schemes. He sneered as he glanced through the typed pages. How could a man be fool enough to let himself be caught by this balderdash?

Once he thought he heard a sound in the outer office, the faint passing of a footstep and the turn of a knob somewhere, but his attention failed to concentrate on this infinitesimal sound. Presently the letters were finished and he put them aside to glance around the rooms which were in uninviting confusion. He had already arranged to give them up and the next day would see his belongings transferred to his new home; but before this could be done there loomed the distasteful task of packing and destroying the endless souvenirs of this period. No one could attend to this but himself, and the prospect of the evening spent in this melancholy task was not alluring. But before he had more than accepted the duty as his own, he heard Peter's voice calling to him from the outer office.

Peter had entered unheard, and, without knowing why he

should yield to the summons, Cleve got up from his comfortable chair and returned sullenly to the office.

He found Peter leaning lightly against the edge of a desk, smoking a cigarette with leisurely enjoyment. He was carefully dressed and bore no resemblance to the Peter who had once presented himself after four in the afternoon. His nearsighted eyes were masked by their shielding glasses and offered no solution of his intention.

"A busy day," he offered, casually. "This Dupagny affair has made no end of a row."

"I hope," said Cleve, behind his own mask, "that you haven't been hit very hard, though undoubtedly you're the chief loser. What do you mean to do about Dupagny?"

Peter eyed him steadily. "What," he asked in return, "do you mean to do about his wife?"

Cleve was stunned. His face turned from white to red. "By God!" he stammered, "by what right do you ask me that?"

"As his creditor," Peter said calmly, "I'm taking over all his effects, and his wife is chief among them. I've got to find her status. So I ask you, what do you mean to do about her?"

"You beast," stammered the younger man, helplessly, "you damned beast! I'd like to choke you with those words—"

"Why don't you—? If I suggest a responsibility which you may honestly repudiate, then by all means choke me. I shall not resist."

But Cleve did not move from where he stood. "The scandal—dragging her name into publicity—a low brawl between men—"

"You are right," Peter agreed with a sad smile, "a woman's reputation may endure any wrong from a man's

hand, rather than an honest fight over her. In that case she always emerges more blackened, more bruised than the combatants themselves. Well, then, since we are not to fight, shall we discuss the issue calmly and find the remedy, if one exists?"

Sweat stood out on Cleve's forehead. There was a strained and livid look about his mouth, but he managed to speak in a natural tone.

"I am glad if you have decided to cease insulting me. It is hard to endure when I could break you so easily. . . . Don't imagine that I am afraid of you physically. . . . I went to war, and I am not a coward. You who remained behind, are an unknown quantity. . . ."

Peter smiled quietly. "That is one of the unanswerable questions. Who were the brave men? Who will ever measure the courage of those who were too young or too old; the sick and the helpless; those with weak eyes and imperfect limbs,—the comedians who were too short or too tall—? Posterity will have to choose its heroes from too few."

The other took refuge in a sneer. "Did you call me in here to discuss the war, and your reasons for—not going? If that's the case, would you mind excusing me? I'm leaving the rooms to-morrow."

The room was unlighted except for the shaft of yellow that came from the open door of Cleve's apartment, but this was enough to reveal the alteration in Peter's mocking smile to grim resolution. "Do you mean that you are abandoning her? Leaving her to the mercy of the public—?"

"How dramatic you are! If you are interested, why not come to the aid of the lady yourself? She is very beautiful and you could make her entirely happy in your philanthropic way—"

"What a scoundrel you are—!"

"Look here," said Cleve, reasonably. He suddenly abandoned anger as unlikely to get the argument to safer ground. It was not his intention to quarrel violently with Peter Withrow if that could be avoided, and, aside from that, he hated intense emotions almost as much as he dreaded to make enemies. All this bandying of words appeared foolish and thriftless to him; it seemed that they would reach solid ground somewhere if Peter could be persuaded to discuss the matter amicably. He met the hostile gaze of his opponent, his own eyes filled with kindly, pleasant lights. "Look here, you know, Withrow, you are disposing of a lady's name rather carelessly. How do you know that she'd care for my companionship,—or yours, for that matter? And as for the gossip of the town,—what would be said if you or I took an active part in relieving her natural distress at Dupagny's failure? You know how impossible it is for a man to help a woman,—a woman of his own class? Try to look at this calmly. We must find some other way to reach her and protect her at the same time."

There was enough truth in what he said to bring Peter to a pause. On second thought he admitted that he had rather bungled things; pity for Rose and a deeper reason, unmentionable in this scene, swayed him beyond caution. But he was only partially mollified by Cleve's specious words, seeing in them only another cause for contempt.

"Mrs. Dupagny and I have been very good friends," continued Cleve, more confidently, noting the change in the other's face. "We are still friends, I hope. But what can I do more than offer my sympathy and more material help, if that is necessary?"

"You can make her your wife," Peter said, in a low voice.

While the words hung in the air, Cleve laughed outright.

His wife! It seemed to him that Peter must be joking. Not even when he believed himself in love had he thought of that possibility. Then the absurdity of the whole thing struck him afresh and he laughed again. Dupagny was a defaulter, but Rose was nevertheless his wife, and here was Peter preaching propriety and heroics, and planning to marry her off to him before her freedom had been suggested. It sounded more than immoral.

"Gad! But you're a modern!" he exclaimed, when he had finished laughing. "Has it occurred to you that Dupagny is still in the land of the living, though I'll admit a divorce would not be difficult?" When his mockery brought no response he became as grave as Peter himself, understanding that the subject was not to be disposed of so easily. He continued in a changed voice: "When a man is thinking of marriage—a real marriage—he doesn't go about looking among other men's wives for a woman to make his own,—or that isn't my idea of finding my own wife. My future is in the making, Withrow, and a large part of it depends on the woman who will share it. Marriage, to my mind, is the most important thing in life,—not in itself, perhaps, but to the future of mankind. It isn't to be entered into lightly,—attraction of the senses isn't enough. . . . Good Lord, man, think of giving your name and honor into the hands of a woman who has abused those gifts from another man—"

Peter, grown paler than ever during this speech, said dryly, "But when you haven't any honor to give—"

The subtle meaning in his tone eluded Cleve. "Every man has honor," he said briskly. "The honor of his promise to live straight,—his children's honor—"

"Then you are thinking of marriage?"

"Right," Cleve admitted, holding his attitude of imper-

sonality. "You see, I can't do anything. I belong to another woman. She loves me. And Rose Dupagny is not an innocent girl. She expects nothing from me—she couldn't. I have promised nothing."

Peter's shoulders dropped. His passion subsided. Before Cleve's unanswerable statement, his championship of a lost cause took on a hopeless aspect. The words "she loves me" deprived him of courage, and, seeing his advantage, Cleve pursued it eagerly. "*Her* name mustn't be brought into this!" he concluded with meaning.

There was no more to be said. Peter made a tentative gesture of resignation and moved toward the door of his own room, so seldom used; he opened and closed the door without a parting word, and Cleve, after a moment of silent contemplation in which he reviewed the interview, trying to see if his case might have been more strongly put, shrugged his shoulders lightly and retreated to his own apartment. This time as the door shut, the key clicked in the lock. He had no intention of enduring a second interruption.

Then in the large office everything was dark and quiet. There was no sound from either of the rooms where the two men had disappeared. When this was certain beyond a doubt, the door of Major Bailey's office, which during this time had been lightly ajar, opened wide enough to permit Antonia Christy to pass through. Being familiar with every object in her way she was able to reach the exit without a sound, though she moved slowly and with all the care of a sleep walker. When she was safe in the street she almost ran.

Her presence there had been brought about by simple and natural means and in visiting her once familiar ground she had no thought of disobeying Peter's stern injunction which had dismissed her. When she returned from the drive with

Cleve her mother had met her with an assortment of messages from the irascible Major. There were some important papers which she had brought home a few days before for special study and forgotten to return. The Major had made it plain that his future peace of mind depended on the return of these papers that night, and Antonia, not daring to trust the mission to Donnie, chose to return them herself. But she had barely entered the Bailey office when she heard Peter, entering on her very footsteps, call his summons to Cleve.

She had been an unwilling and unintentional listener to their conversation, but after the first few sentences, she did not remember that she was eavesdropping. There was a consideration at stake much too important for the splitting of hairs, and in learning what she could from the words of these two who did not dream of her presence, she acted with the supreme independence which was coming more and more to mark her swift decisions. She had promised to be Cleve Harkness' wife, and almost at once she understood that he was not free to marry her,—not as she understood freedom.

She walked swiftly along the quiet streets that were already dark, except for the street lights that were beginning to glow at every corner. She passed through Christy Square in the shadow of the staid old building where her name was inscribed with honor, and, looking up at its solemn windows as her own father never forgot to look, she smiled with brave reassurance that soon everything would be righted. Something lay cold and heavy in her breast so that she found it difficult to breathe, but her steps did not pause and she held her head proudly,

The Square was deserted and most of the shops were dark, but on a corner the gayly colored lights advertised a

drug store. The place was occupied by a few loitering customers who were drinking the first hot cocoa of the season and she made her way through these idlers to the telephone booth at the rear. When she called Peter Withrow's number and finally heard his voice replying, she said without a break in her own, "Come to me."

CHAPTER XXIII

ROSE remembered. She was at her own door when the graceful, drooping figure at Cleve's side recalled itself to her memory. The Christy girl, of course. Why had she not known at once, when long ago her heart warned her of this inevitable climax? Toward the end of her journey she walked with difficulty. One of her slipper heels had twisted and broken in two, and though there were shoes in plenty waiting her choice, she did not think of changing the ones she had worn on the pitiful pilgrimage across the town.

While she was in the street she thought the time would never come when she could hide her face and the tattered rags she wore behind closed doors, but now, at home once more, the walls of the house smothered her, and she waited only long enough to cover herself with the long cape rejected by the servant, who had long since departed with her spoils. She found a hat whose drooping brim concealed her face effectively, and dressed in this fashion it was possible to slip through the late afternoon streets of Cresston unobserved.

While she was making ready and while she was walking as eagerly and rapidly as she could toward her destination, she rehearsed her pain continuously, as a child protests futilely against injustice. She could think of nothing but that girl, sitting beside Cleve so naturally, as if she belonged there by right.

It was the frankness of their association that appalled her. It was almost as though he meant the town to understand that here was an affair that need not be hidden—something he was not ashamed of! And yet, that would be too absurd. Men like Cleve did not court serious love affairs with young persons who typed their letters. She had never been deceived about Cleve; she knew that his character was not sacrificial, and this was the time when she rejoiced in his selfishness. It reassured her.

But the moment of her relief was shattered by other recollections, dubious and obscure. Even while she traduced Antonia she knew that the girl was not of the ordinary clay of which her imagination tried to fashion her. Peter Withrow had loved her; she was extraordinary enough to charm Peter, who had been indifferent to all women.

Confronted by this thought, so menacing in its possibilities, her unseen wounds became too much to bear alone. Her mind, sharpened by this conflict, leaped to meet a plan as cruelly simple, as childish, as primitive emotion alone can invent.

The lateness of the hour made the chance of meeting any one who knew her a small one. At this hour her one time friends were lingering over tea tables, nibbling reputations with their almond cakes; doubtless in a dozen houses her own name occupied the public moment. . . . It was not yet five, but already street lamps had begun to flare into yellow brilliancy, the same lights that Antonia had seen appear. The two might have passed within a yard of one another, but in spite of their thoughts, clinging desperately to each other, they did not meet. . . . The sun had gone down in reddened splendor and these lights, reflecting against the wind-swept sky, caught their reflection in the windows of the Sheridan Building which dominated

everything, like a giant caught playing with pigmies at nightfall.

She found the place she sought in a mean little side street, off-shooting from the Square. Once, weeks ago, she had idly noted the faded lettering upon the windows and her subconscious mind retained the knowledge for a reason she now recognized. At first she did not know how to reach the rooms, now that she had found them, but a sullen grocer on the first floor, putting his stock in order, showed her the dim stairway leading up between the two buildings.

It was dark in the upper hall and a musty odor pervaded everything: the smell of ancient papers, cobwebs, and old books seldom opened and never read.

Doors appeared at intervals along the corridor, but it was much too dark to read the names upon the clouded glass panels. As she was hesitating in the shadow, one of these doors opened to allow a man to pass out; another stood on the threshold and from his bared head and air of occupancy she knew that he belonged there.

The man who was leaving was a policeman. Rose was aware of policemen as one is aware of awesome, unpleasant features of life. They arrested motorists for speeding and searched the baggage of dishonest servants, but she herself had never encountered one—never stood trembling in the background while a policeman, huge in the gloom, smelling of strong tobacco, virile, ominous, kept her waiting.

Believing themselves alone, these two, the gray, dusty man in his cell and the portly, tightly buttoned officer, so incongruous and mysterious in their affiliation, continued speaking in low, guarded tones of the subject that engaged them. The policeman said in the blustery way that is supposed to frighten little children:

"You know, Judge, you can catch most any sort of a butterfly in a net."

But the other man saw Rose before he could reply, as she stood half revealed in the light of the door. At the same time the officer also saw her standing there and doffed his gold-banded cap quite as another man would do, watching her disappear into the room from which he had emerged. She was glad when the door closed and she was alone with the bare-headed elderly man she had come to see.

It was a little lighter in the room, and, seeing the sort of person she was alone with, all the vague and indistinct fears set in vibration by the burly officer left her. There was nothing to cause her uneasiness here. This dingy personality in the midst of his dingy books and with the aroma of countless dead days about him was such a man as she might have passed a thousand times in the streets without knowledge of his existence.

He made a seat for her by sweeping a clutter of papers from a chair that creaked protestingly beneath even her slight weight. Then he sat down facing her.

Rose began uncertainly, "You—you are Judge Christy?" Now that she was here, there were obstacles that prevented the completion of her plan. She searched in her mind for explanations that would satisfy him but found none.

He inclined his head a little to her questioning, admitting without comment. She saw that he was studying her from beneath his shaggy brows, but this scrutiny was so impersonal that she could not resent it. "Why have you come?" his attitude asked, though he said nothing.

Rose's face was concealed by the droop of her hat. Under this shelter she was safe, but it did not lessen her confusion in the presence of the man who silently regarded her while

she sought desperately for words to begin. Finally she said in a low, faltering voice:

"I am interested in young girls. . . . I wonder if you know that—your—daughter—"

"You are Laurence Dupagny's wife?" he said.

She started, forcing back an explanation that would have betrayed her panic. Yet after this brief confusion she became calm. What did it matter? His recognition had the effect of organizing her straying faculties and instantly she had provided herself with a plausible story behind which she could reveal her true purpose.

"You are correct," she said, more evenly. "I am Mrs. Dupagny, and because I have suffered so much from a persisting evil, I would save others from suffering if I could."

"What do you wish to say to me?" he asked in a muffled voice.

She had the sensation of plunging into deep water that closed more relentlessly over her head with every word she uttered. She had no time to think where this might lead her. All was chaos.

"Do you know that the building where your daughter is employed is a den—a den—of vice. Women go there—women——" She stopped, appalled at the confirmation of his face. "You—you—know—" she stammered.

"But what has this to do with your coming here?" he demanded, sternly.

She shook with nervousness. Without the jealous fury that preyed upon her heart she could not have answered, but she forced herself to say: "She is a young girl—perhaps she does not know that being there with those two young men—both of them——. And she has been seen with first one and then the other. . . . It is becoming

a scandal. To-day—to-day—she was driving with Cleve Harkness—boldly, as though her name had never been connected with his." She stopped to moisten her lips, appalled by what she was saying, yet driven to continue. "Do you know that when she left her home—your house—it was to meet him. He took her to the house where she now lives . . . he lived there himself . . . he made the woman take her in—"

She could think of no further calumny. This indictment which before coming here had been so overwhelming, seemed to fall helplessly on the air, as rain upon the stone face of a granite wall. She had expected a scene of recrimination and anger, but nothing like this happened. It had grown swiftly darker and she could see the bulk of his figure undistinguished by any signs that would betray his mental processes. She could not even say if she had wounded him; but presently he startled her, not by replying to her allegations but by making a statement of his own.

"My child, you love this man."

He said this simply, but in so deep and tender a tone that at once her resistance was broken. She pressed her knuckles against her lips to silence the sobs that convulsed her throat. She had expected anything but this, and she had no answer ready. He did not seem to be a man who would understand, yet he was saying this! How did he know?

"You love him, and now he is turning away from you to another," he went on. "You have not learned yet that men cannot be held by other men's wives?" Then he added in a dry voice: "What would you have me do?"

Rose wrung her hands. "Give him back to me! If she were not there with him every hour—— Oh, don't you understand? I have given up everything—everything—and

I have lost! And this girl is your own daughter. Don't you love her? Don't you care about saving her?"

This seemed to touch him in some remote way. He shifted in his chair, but when he spoke it was in the same emotionless tone.

"My daughter is a woman. She has chosen to take a place in the world and she must endure with this all that other women who leave the shelter of their homes must endure—blame and praise—and, if deserved, punishment. My feeling is not a factor." He turned from this phase abruptly: "Your husband has left you?"

"This morning," she acknowledged drearily, as though this meant little. "A girl went with him—one of those girls. She was in his office."

He heard this, his chin sunk on his breast. By this time they would have been in complete darkness, but for the shallow rays of a street light outside. In this darkness they became only two voices; her own quivering and choked with tears and his the dry, husky tone of a man who lives in silence, speaking as little as he may. After a brief pause she heard him say. . . .

"Your home has been broken by—this woman?"

She waited for him to say more, but, when nothing came she timidly pursued her inquiry: "What do you intend to do?"

Then the voice turned upon her with some dreadful exclamation, a word she had never heard. It fell upon her like a missile hurled from some inconceivable height.

"You barren woman! If you had ever borne a child you would not dare ask that—"

She ran from the place in terror, stumbling on her broken slipper. Her mouth hung open; she thought he was

about to strike her. But when she reached the hall her footsteps were the only sound she heard and trembling at what she had done, she groped her way to the square of light that led to the stairway.

But he had already forgotten her.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT was much later when he left the office, locking the door methodically and made his way to the street. In the same block a belated butcher still remained, pathetically attentive behind his narrow counter. Christy entered the shop and carefully selected and paid for two chops, and, with the small package in his hand, made his way diagonally across the Square to the intersection of Armitage Street. On his way home he was obliged to pass the Pendleton house which, in spite of changed name-plates, would always be known by that title; then the Withrow place, a huge and starkly ugly building, where a housekeeper was mistress and the Colonel, beginning to lose his gallantry and become addicted to old men's interests, pottered about on bright mornings with a garden hose and rose scissors. Then a little further and he came to the Dupagny house—emptiest of all, for here no spirit of other days lived, and already the trees and flowers that grew around it seemed to have closed in jealously, as though to hide the secret of its inner wounds.

When he reached the corner where the big arc light threw a ghastly pale blue aura over the orchard world of his own premises, there was a scattering of little boys who had been holding conclave in the corner of the fence. He had seen them there often and Donnie had always been among them until now——

A man crossed the street and intercepted him. It was the officer who constantly humiliated Miss Plumey by pre-

suming upon his acquaintance with her father. The two men meeting under the arc light uttered indifferent greetings, and stopped to talk together for five minutes in voices too low to be heard except by one another. When their conference was over the officer went on with quickened steps, but Roscoe Christy turned into his own gate heavily.

It was long past the usual supper hour, but when he had lighted the gas in the middle room he did not go into the kitchen to begin the preparation of a meal which had been his habit since Mrs. Christy went away. Instead, he dropped the little brown paper package upon a table where it remained, forgotten.

The room was much as it had always been. Mrs. Christy would slip back in the mornings and with the touch of legerdemain set everything right, so that when he returned at night it was as though the pixies had been at work. But he never knew this. He would sit in the same place, scattering the ashes from his pipe over the brushed hearth, leaving the pages of the newspaper lie as they fell from his hand, unconscious that the debris from the previous night had been taken away. He did not feel her simple ministrations; what he missed was her visible presence and the light in the home kitchen at evening.

The middle room was cold and dull; the gaslight accentuated the gloomy cavern that yawned like a pit. He sat down in the great chair as though his legs failed him after the long walk. There was something that he would do after awhile, but now he was tired and must rest.

There was not a sound anywhere about the place but the stertorous breathing from the chair and the loud and endless ticking of the old silver watch hanging on the peg beneath the high mantel shelf. The place was wrapped in an atmosphere of waiting, like the breathless void that preceded

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grass sent out wavering shafts of light, and in this illumination the long dim rows of trees seemed to falter and shrink, as though fearing their time must come next. As the destroyer passed among them they meekly yielded, like old men who are too plentiful and understand that they must make way, voicelessly and without reproach for the fruit they have borne.

When his arms were loaded he made his way to the house, leaving the ax where it fell, but carrying the lantern in some fashion upon a crook of his finger. As he fed the branches, some of them raw and bleeding, to the insatiable mouth of the black hole, there seemed to be no end to it. The cavern, empty so long, would swallow the whole orchard without becoming satiated.

But this night it should have enough and he made a second and third trip to the wounded trees before he touched the pile with fire. As the match struck against a spray of fiber, there was a faint flame, tiny as a spark against the limitless sky, and after this a curl of smoke and the aromatic odor of leaves that had clung to the last. Finally there was a pillar of flame, leaping like an upflung arm into the tunnel that would at last free its hot spirit.

He returned to his chair exhausted after his efforts which had been violent and unremitting. Time had passed. It was nearly ten by the watch that was now turned to a face of gold by the conflagration that leaped toward the distant sky. He could no longer see the hands move, but the glinting metal made a spot of radiance against the dark face of the wall, flashing a message of rich approval for what he had done.

The whole room was changed by the living hearth. Its desolation passed, yet its loneliness became doubly poignant. A time like this, which marked the passing of one whose

name would be heard no more, was not meant to be spent in unshared watch. Yet who was there to sit with him, but the shades of those who must approve of what he had done? As if some voice which must be answered accused him, he began to bluster in a guttural voice that found stoppage somewhere in his throat: "She is no different from other women. By God, no different! What is a woman? By accident she remains virtuous—" Then as though this blasphemy troubled him, he became silent, after a long while muttering: "Let her stand in the stocks—"

Ten had come and gone—the half hour. The fire, burning tumultuously, ate its way through the rampart of round limbs and victoriously settled into glowing and subtle harvest. The poor room was wrapped in borrowed glory. Warm shadows played upon the ceiling and upon the stiff faces of hideous old portraits which alone had survived time and poverty. All the fuel would soon be gone and with its end would come the time he waited for. As the minutes ticked remorselessly away he began a monotonous counting, as prisoners count the seconds before their reprieve. How fast they came, how inexorable. In the beginning time had lagged, but now it rushed upon him like a tide—as years crowd upon a life.

Leaving the computation of time, his mind retreated beyond the hour to years that had gone—seeing Antonia in the phases of her life which led to to-night; reviewing her as a baby, "the first one that lived,"—a solemn-eyed sedate child of parents who had lost the first joy in accomplishing parenthood. Then he recalled her toddling age when she had disdained help from older hands, choosing to make her world discoveries alone; and all along the way to girlhood, remote and pure, with her large, intent eyes that demanded to know everything.

This had been his daughter. He had not known her very well, being content to have the shell beneath his hand without seeking its heart. And she had slipped away. Now he did not know what held her, or where were the four walls that closed her in.

Too late he knew now how much he had loved her. From the hour she had lain across his knees in this chair, he had loved her more than all! But what had he loved? Was it her beauty, delicate and fine, lighted by the glow of her spirit that was always reaching beyond? What had he loved?

He had loved in her the presentment of his race, the women long dead who were to live again in her; the sullen pride which demanded of life that which was stubbornly withheld. He had not loved the real Antonia, who, remorselessly stealing the dreams of his own youth, refused to let him choose her fate. He had not loved her spirit which, having no sex, defeated him with the strength inherited from his own. Fruitless love! It might have been unmeasured, but he had refused her even a moiety.

The recurrence of this thought became intolerable. The very bitterness of self-accusation began to create a slow reversal of feeling which was inevitable. He tried to find excuses for his coldness to her, and to justify the wrong he had done with the foreshadowing of another wrong. If he had withdrawn from her in the understanding of the spirit, so had she no less withheld herself from him. She had done more. She had taken from him the love of her mother—that he sat alone to-night was because of her.

Sorrow had come and gone. He no longer grieved; he lifted his eyes to the watch above his head and saw that the hands had moved across the face. In the hour passed since his first vision of her upon his knees, he had run

the gamut of all memories of her. No more could come. The past had thrust itself upon him but vanquished it would come no more.

He had longed fiercely for the hour of his vengeance, but now that it was almost here he was not so sure. He felt a weakening of his hatred and fury against the elements which had defeated him; already he sounded the shallow depths of hatred and the fire of his fury left him cold. In the beginning he could have helped in the sacrifice like a pagan god before an altar that knows no kinship, but with the burning down of the fire his resolution changed to the gray of covered embers. He was no longer sure. In the uncertainty of this fading resolve his immobile face began to break like the crumbling apple boughs. Revenge was certain, but was it revenge he longed for, or was it the breath of forgiveness?

The dull glow of the watch turned to crimson, then it became dull as the fire sank, but out of the darkness the faint, measured sounds of the escaping moments sent their message. He could no longer see even the face of the watch. Terrified, he realized that the hour might come and go, leaving him unwarned. All at once he longed for silence, complete and unbroken by a sound! If only the watch would stop to relieve the torture of this suspense. But this had never happened. He remembered the years that had passed, his lifetime and his father's lifetime, and all that time those tiny hands had never been stilled. At that his calm was broken as a structure crumbles before a flood. He tried to stand, but the effort was not fulfilled; his limbs would not respond.

Despair seized him; he was chained to the chair, while just beyond his hand the echo of passing time beat upon his ears. If he could stop that—hold it back! With an

intolerable struggle for freedom he tore himself from the chair which held him in its dead arms, and took one, two, dragging steps toward the sound that tormented him. He could see the insensate face turned mockingly to meet him. The hands pointed to twenty-five minutes past eleven.

What had he done? This could not be! He threw out his arm, stiff as one of the tree arms his ax had severed, and swept the old watch away before it. It fell with a loud crash and like a log he fell with it.

Presently he recovered enough to turn his drawn face to a voice that called persistently through a stupor fast controlling him. The watch lay close to his cheek, its crystal shattered to a thousand tiny particles. But this only served to release the sound that penetrated to his ears with redoubled volume. The second hand had not lost a single beat, as the day does not lose a moment or the years an hour. His brain was clear though his body no longer vibrated with the passions that had brought him to this. All that had been important lost its importance and in his fall he read the catastrophe of his whole life. He had tried to hold back the years by the greatness of a name which other men had earned, but now at last he was to learn that time cannot be stayed. Measured by this infinite process the puniest instrument has time to defy a nation, just as the broken relic beside him defied destruction at his hand, while events moved mercilessly on without waiting for his poor shell to rise and follow.

CHAPTER XXV

ROSE had found refuge on one of the hard iron benches in Christy Square. She had been there for a long time, hours, it seemed, and she did not know where she would go when she left the shelter of the trees. Dim people passed and repassed her retreat, growing fewer as the evening advanced and the lighted lamps of their houses called them home. In this concealing darkness Antonia passed, her skirts almost touching Rose, and a little later Roscoe Christy went by going to his lonely vigil without seeing her. Had these three, who were so near, been drawn together, their hands might have closed each other's wounds, but this was not to be. Though their breath mingled, contact between them was impossible.

Presently no one passed.

Like the others whose lives touched her own that night, she watched the lights come on around the Square with night; fireflies captured behind closed doors. Somewhere, shut in by shrouded windows, a band met for practice; the lonely, piercing ripple of a clarionet forced its way through walls and space, melting into the dull world outside. The plaintive purity of this sound found its way into her heart and brought tears to soften her dry eyes.

She was ashamed now of what she had done, for, with passion spent, she could not see what this availed except to further the degradation of her spirit. She tried to erase it from her mind, but her own words, repeating themselves in endless iteration, had the effect of a relentless lesson which

she accepted passively. All that she had said was a lie; the reverse was the truth and the certainty of this was part of her punishment—Cleve loved this girl as he had never loved her, even in the beginning.

She saw everything now, and it seemed the most inexcusable stupidity that she had not seen it long ago, saving herself such pain as she had endured. For surely in time she would learn not to care.

The emotional crisis through which she had passed, her exhaustion, the physical weakness of her body, all helped to crystallize this momentary vision of the truth. She had ceased to feel; her body with its heart that beat so thickly, and the pulsing blood that could race through her being like a flame, was now a spent thing, lying on an iron bench beneath the trees, and she was some one else who watched its throes with calm and pitying eyes.

Why had she loved so much? Now she could see herself as a spendthrift pouring out the golden coin of her love to find it cherished so little, and she was ashamed of having given so much. And why had she given? What was there in her body so delicate and fragile, that called only to evil? No one had loved her—no one had given her what others received in full measure. Her beauty had brought only this!

And being in that moment beyond the reach of passion, she began to recall with faltering, timid hope, that life might not be over for her, even though this had happened. Yesterday a chance had been offered. The women, her own kind, had not deserted her. One of them had said that she would be helped—she was not forgotten! The thought was like a soothing hand. She had never liked women, yet now their strength was behind her—she could lean on them until her own returned.

Yesterday she had wept and maundered about love—the love she had never had. If this cleansed feeling had been hers then, what might have been saved her to-day? She could still feel her feet in the dust!

Remembering this, she tried to rise in the effort to release herself from the cloying thought, but she was numb with cold and long inaction, and found that she could barely stand.

She began to walk with painful, slow steps across the Square, afraid, now that she had left the bench, to linger in the shadow. The broken heel of her shoe turned with every step; at last it became like a dull knife, pressing against the hollow of her foot, but always goading her to move on. When she reached the pavement she walked close to the closed fronts of the stores, putting out her hand now and then to steady herself. For awhile her progress was mercifully shielded by the dimness of the shuttered lights, but presently she came to a brighter area. There was a great arched doorway, guarded on either side with wrought iron lamps whose pale yellow glass sides bathed the pavement and the wide interior with a penetrating radiance. In the midst of this glow she paused irresolutely; the place was as familiar to her as her room at home. She had passed those doors a hundred times; had watched their stones laid one upon another. Poor Dupagny, this had been his pride; now what was it to be?

The doors drew her irresistibly, and she began to think about Cleve with a dull insistence that would not be denied. Perhaps he was there, within touch at this very moment! She could see him if she would, hear his voice and answer it; tell him what she had learned in this last hour.

Now that she loved him no longer it could not hurt to see him once again! It would not be disloyal to her new

clean heart to tell him with her own lips that he was free from any claim of hers! Deceived by the torpor of her body, she yielded, turning in between the yellow lamps, crossing the tiled lobby in the broken shoes that made a delicate clatter as she walked, and finally slipping like a shadow into the stairway that arose beside the closed elevator.

When she disappeared a man who had been standing close to a marble pillar behind the cigar stand, stepped out into the lighted space and made a signal to some concealed person who lingered in the recesses of the locked Hewlett Street entrance. If Miss Plumey had been there her surprise might have been great to recognize Connally, the despised companion and confidant of her father, but now in plain clothes with no visible sign of his business about him, and her further amazement would have been overwhelming when she recognized her own father, Edward Plumey, who told his wife only what he pleased, and who now came forth, pleasurably rubbing his hands.

Connally, the policeman, was worried. What a business for a town like Cresston, he said, and did the gentlemen have no respect for themselves?

And Mr. Plumey was equally concerned. He wanted to know if the other had noticed the shoes! A poor creature, down to the dregs, no doubt—walking the pavement with her feet nearly bare. He was a father and his tone was tinged with pity, but Connally only said sternly: "They must be taught a lesson!"

Cleve looked up from his work at the faint signal of footsteps pausing before his door. He was engaged in the pleasantly sentimental task of destroying old love letters—after he had first glanced over them.and smiled at the ardent credulity of the writer. Why did people keep such things—

but more remarkable still, why write them? He was glad that he had never written letters to women, even in reply to the scores he had received, for he had a conviction that women never made away with these trophies, even after ashes had claimed their love.

The pretty gold and gray rooms were in a chaotic state; drawers were pulled from the chiffonier; the writing-desk yawned; in a brazier the white dust of note paper smoldered and died; and scattered everywhere were the belongings accumulated after months of occupancy. Cleve himself was in a gorgeous dressing-gown, a new purchase, and his hair was pleasantly ruffled. Occasionally he would glance at the fabric of the rich robe and caress it lightly, with the pleased admiration of a child in love with finery. He frowned impatiently at the thought of visitors, but called, "Come in," when the steps did not move on.

But when the door opened slowly he sprang to his feet with a smothered exclamation: "Rose!" he cried, stunned at seeing her there.

She came into the room, closing the door gently behind her, and the patent lock slipped into place with a faint click; once there, she let the blue cape fall from her shoulders as though its weight had at last become too much for her strength. "Yes, it is I," she said quietly and with a movement of her lips that might have been a smile.

She had forgotten her torn and draggled gown, but he saw everything in a glance and his amazement changed to apprehension. "Rose!" he cried again, in genuine concern, "what has happened? Have you been hurt?"

She did smile at that; a flicker of amusement lighted the evanescent beauty of her face. "Yes, I have been hurt," she said, and laid her hand upon her heart.

Then he understood that she was here only to renew the conflict he believed was past. He thought, as he had thought ten minutes before, what fools women were! Why could they never write finis to what had moved their hearts? But he tried to speak casually, putting a simple interpretation on her visit as he moved a chair forward for her use. "Then you have run in to help me with this rubbish! I'm moving to-morrow—but of course you know that."

"How was I to know?"

Annoyance, lurking just beneath the surface of his trained smile, came to the fore at that. He frowned quickly. "I thought we had decided to avoid each other for awhile. In view of all that has happened—"

"I know," she said wearily, "much has happened. But you are wrong. I have not come here to reproach you."

"Then why have you come?" he demanded impatiently. But as soon as the words left his lips he regretted them. Nothing could be gained by arousing her anger or emotion of any sort. He decided to use the tactics which had been successful with Peter—calm reason. If she had come in a hysterical state over some grievance, he would soothe her with commonplaces until the danger of a scene was averted. But inwardly he cursed the impulse which had brought her here to harass him with reproaches when he had asked her to forget.

Abandoning the task of burning letters for the moment, he put her in one of the big gray velvet chairs and took the one directly opposite, certain that with his eyes intent upon her he could influence her to his will. There was nothing in his face but gentleness and concern for her welfare. It was irony that a mirror across the room reflected both, like the figures in a life size painting, and Cleve's youth, contrasted

with her dishevelment, became startlingly assertive. She saw his eyes swiftly study this picture, and reading the satisfaction he could not conceal, her own smile became bitter. "Yes, I am old," she said, as though he had made a statement.

He hastened to repudiate this. "You're only a bit seedy, my dear. What made you think of coming here to-night? You ought to be resting—you must have had a beastly day—" He spoke differently; even to himself the words did not sound convincing. He tried hard to instill warmth into the rest of his speech. "I came to see you to-day, Rose, but you didn't wait for me. I made a point of coming but the house was empty as a shell. It gave my nerves a jolt and I didn't wait—it reminded me of an empty trench on the front. I couldn't stay without you."

"That is a worthy comparison," she agreed dully, "an empty trench. Many things have died in that house—I have watched them die."

The fixity of her tone disturbed him; he saw now that this was not a situation to be disposed of with a few neatly turned phrases, but he still had faith in his power to dominate her. "Why did you want to see me, Rose?" he asked. "Is there any way in which I can help you?"

It was by a strong effort that she followed what he said; the words were so empty, so meaningless and inconsequential. She hardly realized that he was sitting opposite her, for now he seemed to be some one else, and not the lover she had known. This feeling was like that exalted moment when she had seemed to see her own body lying on the park bench. . . . But she forced herself to repeat what he said, asking the question of herself: "Why have I come?" but could find no answer.

"I wanted to see you," she said faintly, "but you have changed."

In the materialism of his mood he missed her meaning completely. All he could read in her words was that she meant to cling to him and hamper him by her unwanted love. He resolved to end this.

"Yes, I have changed," he answered in a flat voice. "What did you expect? Did you think I was willing to play forever with you for my companion—for it was only play, you know that. Neither of us was really in earnest. You had your husband I had my career. We couldn't meet on any ground but the flimsy one of—a summer flirtation, shall we say? Now the serious time of winter is coming and the playtime is over. Can't you smile and be game and let it be forgotten, Rose?"

Lying back in the big chair where she was half hidden, she began to breathe deeply, as though to recapture something that was about to elude her. Between the uneven sighs of her parted lips she heard herself saying over and over, "Don't let me sink again—!" He thought she was speaking to him and asked her to repeat, but she looked at him strangely and was silent.

But as the strength that had been missing poured back into her veins, that which had brought her here in resignation eluded her again. "Then you have never loved me!" she whispered.

He contemplated her gravely without grasping the incredulity and despair beneath her words. He remained unconscious of the importance of this meeting for the same reason; he was still thinking only from his own point of view, how this affected him, and what would be the ultimate solution of the annoying problem, for already she had refused to accept the legitimate answer, clamoring

instead for grisly details of the thing that was dead between them. Looking at her so frail, so hectic in her destroyed beauty, he felt a crass impatience with his own handiwork. She was one of the women who refuse to lose graciously, who must haunt tired lovers with their endless "why?" He hardened his heart, already so hard, reassuring himself with the sophistry that to be cruel is kind.

"No," he admitted, slowly, "I don't believe I ever loved you. I could not have loved you, could I, and now feel like this?"

She stiffened slightly, bringing herself upright in her chair. "Then it is ended," she said, steadily.

He was deceived into the belief that he was to escape so easily. She did not intend to make a scene, after all! But in his relief he made the mistake of hastening her departure, for at his first eager step toward the door she lifted her hand in a gesture that halted him as though a spring had snapped. He looked at her in amazement. Life and color had come back into her face as though a flame within had been sent leaping. For a moment he felt the old sense of inferiority and humility before her, waiting for her to speak.

"Why did you swear that you loved me?"

At this, his tension relaxed. He turned from the door in resignation and laughed easily.

"Good Lord! You talk like a novice. Why did I swear that I loved you? Do I have to tell you why? Have you still to learn the catechism of life? Dozens of men must have said that they loved you, yet have any died from it? Have any even suffered?"

"One has suffered," she cried, her voice breaking suddenly, "my husband!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Have you just discovered

that? Or has love become so valuable to you that you regret the loss of his?" He began to move around the room, replacing and disturbing articles here and there; showing, in every movement, how impatient he was to end the interview. "Why are you not with him—wherever he is?"

This taunt brought a sharp cry from her: "You can say this—to me?"

He was furious at her persistency, but the caution of which he owned so large a share silenced his desire to hurt her further, and he was quick to return to the sure ground of reason. "Don't let us quarrel, Rose," he begged. "If we must part, let it be as friends."

At this her lips curved in their old sweet, ironical smile. "Friends? Could we be friends?"

He accepted the challenge eagerly. "Why not? The best of friends. I'll do anything to help you. If you want to join Dupagny and begin over again, I'll help you. I'll do anything in the world—in reason. Why shouldn't you be happy again—with him!"

"How remarkable it is," she said mockingly, "that within a few hours so many have offered to help me. First Nina Tyson and the others, kind souls, wish to pick me up from the mud, then Larry himself—at the very last. Finally *you*. But you are too late if you hope to utilize him in your plan—for there is already a woman with him. She had taken my place, or the place I never held—his chattel, he calls her. You see, even that channel is closed to me!"

He was staggered: "Another woman—"

"Why not?" she questioned wearily. "He only wanted what all of us must have at one time or another. Love."

The trend of the conversation was making him uneasy. They had reached an impasse so far as Laurence Dupagny was concerned, and he saw that this subject must be aban-

doned. But while he searched for something to replace it, Rose began to laugh.

"He suggested that you would take care of me—you!" she gasped, with her handkerchief covering her shaking lips. "What a joke it is, if you can see the f-funny side of it. Here am I—" Her laughter became uncontrollable.

He was frightened. "Rose!" he called peremptorily. He had seen women in courtrooms hysterical because their children were taken from them, and he had a hideous vision of Rose in his apartment, screaming for him to marry her! He was deadly pale and sweat sprung out upon his forehead; a scene like this could ruin a man. "Rose!" he said again, in such a voice that she stopped laughing as suddenly as she had begun. He went on speaking rapidly. "You are mad. No one but a madwoman would behave like this. Why should Dupagny have said a thing like that, and why did you let him believe it? There are laws in the country—a man cannot hand his wife over to another——"

"Those laws have been broken—" she shuddered.

"But I never promised you anything. Be fair, Rose. Did I promise anything?"

Her voice gained weird strength from somewhere in her wracked body. "Promise. . . . Is not love a promise? What were your kisses on my lips but promises? Yet you are right. I could hold you by an empty word if it had been given me, but, no, no, you held it back! You promised nothing."

"Then what do you mean? Good God! Dupagny has deserted you. You have everything on your side. You can free yourself with clean hands, yet you risk everything by coming here where you may be seen at such a time as this! Listen, Rose, you must go at once. Slip out quietly—"

"Out of your life," she finished and then began to sob unevenly. "Men think that they can do anything to a woman, but they can't—they can't! Something will punish you—"

"You talk like a child. Nothing will punish me." He was weary of the scene which promised to be endless. Nothing could come of this ceaseless reiteration; by some means he must bring it to a close. He took a cigarette from a filigree box and lighted it, trying to decide on an opening for what he meant to say. To his consternation she moved closer to him, looking into his face with brimming eyes.

"Why did you cease to love me? What did I do that turned you from me? Cleve, Cleve, why have I lost you!"

He made a gesture of despair. "My God, if love could be brought back! Rose, you don't know what you ask. If love could be coerced what would the world be but a place of groveling beasts, each fighting for what he desired. But this cannot be. The lesson of life is resignation to its laws. The first of these is decency and that is founded on mutual respect—not the thing we knew as love."

"You say this—you?"

"And more. You have had your chance. You have been a wife—why didn't you have children? Give yourself an anchor to rest on in a day like this? Why didn't you give your husband something to work for beside the satisfaction of your whims? No, no, Rose, I am free. You cannot call me back. You have nothing for me.

"I have not begun to live, my dear, and my life is planned far ahead of to-night. There is no place in it for you. You are my past. You belong to the era that lies behind me and time does not retrace its footsteps."

In the beginning he had thought of her, but in the sound of his own voice he forgot her. He liked the cadence of

these phrases that seemed to solidify the vague dreams of his life to come with Antonia. He did not think of himself as cruel; his feeling for Rose had become so impersonal that he could watch her shrink without emotion. But he was not prepared for her passion. She ran to him, striking out with her delicate hands.

"Damn you—damn you—" she cried fiercely, with the impression that it was her own breast she was beating. But this frantic action, pitiful and futile, only had the result of changing his complacence to active anger. He pushed her hands away with the disgust of a man for a woman's blows, and, as though he had in turn struck an actual blow, she staggered against the square table that occupied the center of the room and clung there, gazing at him unbelievingly.

"You can do that because you love another woman," she moaned. "You can treat me like this! Oh, I know that I have no pride—I have lost everything by coming to you, but I thought if I could see you again— It is too late! You were with her to-day. It is for her sake you have deserted me."

"What good can it do to go over all this again?" cried Cleve in an exasperated tone. "Don't you see how it hurts us both? I thought you understood. Yes, Rose, I love some one else. Don't look like that. I am not trying to hurt you, but you must see that anything between you and me is impossible—"

"But you will never marry her," she gasped, with a return of her flickering passion. "I went to see her father to-day. I told him that she came here to see you—that the whole town was talking about her. I made him think— Ah, what do I care if you strike me! You killed me long ago."

He may have meant to strike her but it never came to that; his arm dropped heavily. In her words there was an uncanny prescience that shattered even his cruelty. He turned away with a short laugh: "No one would believe such a lie," he scoffed, controlling himself with difficulty.

He deliberately took up a package of letters and began turning them with his fingers, glancing over the closely written pages, smiling absently, pretending not to think of her. His complete disdain was far more destructive than his anger and her excitement died under it. His straight back, clothed in the rich purple and gold brocade, was turned squarely to her; she could see the clean column of his neck, bent slightly forward, and the way his hair was clipped close around the edges in the military fashion he still affected. She watched him toss the letters carelessly upon the smoldering brazier—letters written by some woman who trusted—and reach for others.

The disorder of the room began to press upon her consciousness and she remembered that he had spoken of leaving; this was but preliminary to the tremendous change which was present in the very atmosphere about them. Already the place was unfamiliar and ugly like the unfinished interior of a hastily made garment. Her eyes, tired of tears, faltered. He was right; there was nothing for her here.

Presently when she knew that she could control her voice, she would speak to him, saying good-by for the last time. As she steadied herself against the table she saw that the drawer was half open. It was a deep drawer, full of such relics as he was bent upon destroying, old letters, dance programs, discarded gloves and a hundred useless things. On top of all the miscellany, as though it had been placed there as a silent invitation for her eyes, was a pistol.

It was a cheap thing, possibly never used. The nickel finish of the barrel was black and discolored in spots, but in its compact outline, so quiescent yet with such silent menace, there was a sort of secret consolation that flashed to her like the signal of a mysterious friend.

Her fingers closed cautiously about it and with the touch of the cold metal there came a wild reaction to her moment of resignation. She need not suffer any more. As she stood looking at the thing in her hand Cleve turned his head and saw it. His exclamation brought her glance upward to his and she beheld a sort of bewildered and ludicrous terror in his face that was singularly familiar in some distant way. . . . For a moment silence hung between them like a visible object; the beginning of an event, tragic and frightful, was in their awakening faces; all that had gone before was nothing, mere lightning flashes from the sky of their dead passion. In a heartbeat something of what was to come revealed itself before it was lost in the meaningless babble of words. . . . Then this was past and her gaze left his to return to the object in her hand.

The vague similarity between this scene and another she had witnessed returned to her mind; she sought for and recovered the scattered threads of memory. She remembered the day when she had first doubted him; the dark theater where they had sat shoulder to shoulder and watched the shadows play across the screen in a ridiculous presentment of love and tragedy. The woman in the picture had wanted to die, and the convenient means had been found beneath her hand, just as this had come beneath her own. She remembered how she had gibed at this—such things could never happen! Yet she was here—staring fascinated, like the woman of the play—at the pistol in the drawer!

His voice, alarmed, persuasive, recalled her. "Put that thing down. It might go off!" Words! She was important only in her possession of this tawdry danger.

"Don't be afraid," she heard herself saying, but like a sleepwalker she retreated as he advanced. He continued to talk to her, holding out his hand and using the coaxing voice one uses to a child. "Don't play with that . . . it's an old gun . . . never safe . . . it's loaded. It might go off!" But as he came toward her she continued to step back until the circuit of the room had been made in this ghastly fashion, as two wary gladiators avoid each other before coming into conflict.

The pistol hung loosely in her hand and she smiled into his face, a grimace, desperate and unreal. His obvious terror surprised her and fed the consuming fire in her heart. She said to herself: "He is afraid of *this*. This has the power to punish him for me!" Yet while this furtive reassurance voiced itself in her mind, another voice, more poignant, more entreating, spoke dimly from her spirit: "This is not I . . . I who love him would not injure him."

Somewhere in the building a sound repeated itself monotonously, but without meaning to them. He stared at her fixedly, reading some wild purpose in her face, suddenly crying out, "Rose! What do you mean to do?"

All the chaotic impulses that had played upon her for hours crystallized into sudden knowledge. "I am not afraid to die," she murmured. "It would be easier to die than to suffer like this!"

But as she spoke he seemed to forget her: "What is that sound?" he whispered. A sudden clamor had begun not far away; the loud voices of men in a furious altercation; other sounds. "It is the police!" Cleve cried, appalled. "Old

Christy has set them on. They will find you here! This will ruin me."

Nothing could have been more obvious than his indifference to her; nothing could have shown more plainly the tremendous loss she had sustained in wasting her love upon this man who absorbed only to give bitterness in return. A vast disgust for him, for herself, for life, came between her and her anguish of a moment before. She no longer saw him as he appeared to her eyes, but as the living exposition of the sin that had destroyed her. Staring at him without recognition, she leveled the pistol at his breast. Even as the trigger responded, she was saying, "This is a dream. This cannot be I."

He turned slowly half away from her, and, his knees bending like broken straws, let his body fall as it would. . . . But as he swayed back and forth before her like some fantastic pendulum his eyes did not leave her own, and there was still time left to read their incredulity. . . . Then it was over. He was finished. He would wound her heart no more. . . .

The pistol fell crashing. She was afraid . . . in deadly fear. She covered her face and ran blindly, but a dozen steps brought her to the blank wall where she clung, beating herself against it, body and hands, as though it must open and take her in from very strength of her desire.

The report within the four walls seemed to reverberate eternally, but at last silence overcame its echoes and a dreadful stillness, more ominous than sound, replaced it. Her deep sighs filled the room; there was no movement anywhere.

It was impossible to endure this! Little by little she dragged herself from the sheltering wall and returned

timidly to the center of the room. She was calm, now. She did not wish to escape; her blind terror was gone. She called to him gently, "Cleve, Cleve."

He remained on the gray rug in a crumpled attitude, not moving, one arm shielding his face. She thought he was trying to frighten her and sank on her knees beside him, trying to draw the sheltering arm away. "I have not hurt you, dear? I was mad, just as you said. Speak to me and I will go away forever. You shall be happy."

But he did not speak. She gazed at his changing features in heavy silence for a moment; then she looked at her hands which had caressed him, and at her knees, warm and wet, kneeling on the rug that was no longer gray.

Sounds were everywhere. Dimly she heard them close at hand, dull, hammering upon doors that would not open. Voices in passion and excitement.

But what had that to do with the silence of this room? She knew now what she had done,—what love had done, and she began to breathe deeply, like a tired child. Well, she would rest once more upon his breast. No one could take that from her. She crept feebly to where that thing lay that in her hands had done this . . . then she returned to him.

They were beating upon the door. Terrible voices demanded that she should open but she only smiled, looking around the room that had known a thousand happinesses and was to shield her with silence to the last. Then she laid her face against his.

CHAPTER XXVI

OMAR has wisely said that "One thing is certain; Life flies—" and if the rest of it is not so true he has said enough in that. And as life flies it mercifully takes with it that which it has given leaving behind the soothing gift of forgetfulness.

It cannot always be winter and the coming of another summer lay like a veil only lifted here and there upon Antonia's memory.

The tragedy that had been the culmination of so many minor tragedies, became in time, from a monstrous foe, a scattered and incoherent rabble of subdued sorrows which attacked Antonia only in lonely moments. Once she had believed that life without Cleve would always be dull and gray; that was before she knew he loved her, and upon the very threshold of happiness, once incredible, she had begun to question the reality of her love for him. She had moments of bitter self-reproach in which she knew herself as a traitor to the instincts of girlhood which called to Cleve as her mate, but after a while she could find a queer comfort in the certainty that her love had faltered before she knew of the dark page which was stained with Rose Dupagny's name. Her love had not failed because of what she knew but because of what she felt, and in spite of regret and grief a little secret, inner voice solaced her. When she passed the Pendleton house she saw that the ruthless repair work was abruptly stopped. The old house, with its scars cruelly ex-

posed behind the new scaffolding, was like a maimed body which the surgeons had abandoned; some of the trees had been cut down but the trailing roses had been spared, and as late autumn came on, a belated bloom sometimes glowed in the dank grass; a spark of life within decay. Antonia at first would turn her face away when she came to this part of the street, but gradually the feeling of dread changed and she found a melancholy pleasure in looking at the walls that were to have sheltered her. She and the old house had a secret that only the two of them would ever know, for she had learned from its antiquity the shallowness of her own brief emotion. As the months went by, Cleve's image became shadowed and dimmed; the brilliance which dazzled her was lost and she could see the thinness of the color that warmed for a little while before it vanished. Sometimes she felt the old pain like a hand upon her heart, but as time went by this became instead of pain, a sort of ritual, like the opening of a book with marked pages.

For the others the wheel had brought compensations for its bitterness. All day long Roscoe Christy lay in his chair under the windows where the plum trees thrust their frosted fingers into his face, and all day long Mrs. Christy sat like the White Queen among the billows of rosy dimities that surrounded her and was happy with a passionate, thrilling happiness that overflowed her simple heart. Nobody would ever know what Mrs. Christy had felt during the weeks of her voluntary exile. She masked her real feeling beneath a profusion of meaningless words which might have been illuminating to herself but left her hearers groping in the dark. She had not been silent even when Cleve's name was mentioned, because silence for her was impossible, but she so swathed and wrapped her replies in endless allusion that the mind wearied of attempting to discover her meaning.

If she was grieved by Antonia's grief, her casual smile did not falter, and if secretly she rejoiced in the revelation that had come in time to prevent a greater disaster, she concealed her gentle triumph. Antonia was there, living between her father and mother, closer to them than she had ever been, and Mrs. Christy, in her thankfulness, asked no more than a satisfied present.

So far as could be seen life returned to its old measured round in the dull little old-fashioned house buried in its old trees, but, under the somnolence, the heart of life stirred like the awakening of the orchard in spring,—for life does not stand still, even in its depths. Antonia's eyes, veiled to the day, began to take on their old questioning, seeking look, when she sat on the steps watching the mysterious night which reveals everything, creep over the world.

. . . . . .

"Mother, what is love?"

Mrs. Christy's face, turned from the pale light of the window was in shadow, but her voice after a pause was serene and calm.

"I thought you knew, child."

"I thought I knew . . . but now. . . . Someway I have lost it. Everything is dark. . . . How can I know?"

She could see her mother's profile against the dim background, and by some miracle its youth lived again. All the blurring shadows cast by unkind years were hidden and only sweetness, the ineradicable blitheness of a young spirit, remained.

In the room beyond, the breathing of some one in troubled sleep came faintly to them, and Mrs. Christy from time to time turned her listening face to this direction; she never quite forgot, though for a long time she had been listening to this.

Antonia after setting out bravely to conquer her fate, had returned to ask her question and to find the answer of her heart, but her mother did not recognize this as a victory. She did not know that Antonia had come back to her when other things failed, or that she was troubled and ashamed.

"You cannot lose love," Mrs. Christy said slowly, seeking for words because she had never expressed this but had only known it as a part of her being . . . "unless you stop giving it. Love is what you hold in your heart." She touched the soft material that had fallen from her hands when it grew too dark to sew. She did not know how to explain what was so clear to her. "Love is giving yourself, I think. . . . I have loved your father a hundred times more since he is so helpless and needs me so. . . . Just as I loved you and Donnie when you were little. . . ."

"But isn't there something more?" cried Antonia fiercely.

Her mother smiled wisely, "Dear me, child! Of course there is more. Didn't you ever notice the sun come out after a long rainy spell? Even the mud puddles shine. Love is like that; it warms and blesses."

Antonia moved restlessly. "Love does not bless—"

. . . . . .

In that long year of readjustment and failure, one thing had remained firm and unshaken, and because humanity is naïvely selfish and regardful only of that which shakes its repose, even Antonia, who believed that she was remorseful and unselfish, could not see what was so close to her.

Peter Withrow had made so many of the hard places smooth that Antonia stumbled only once in awhile. She grew so used to him that she could not realize why her pain and loneliness were less and less with every day.

But Peter was going away. When he first spoke of this she was conscious of a little shock as though some dear,

familiar thing had suddenly been snatched from her hands and afterward, when she tried to accustom herself to the thought, she found an emptiness and a growing wistfulness where she had been content to drift. What would life be like without Peter? She could find no answer to that, though she asked it over and over again.

She watched him come swinging down the street, his steps quickening as he neared the house, as though some inner fire had been lighted. The arc lamp on the corner gave her a glimpse of his shoulders, slightly drooped, carelessly strong. She knew that he was watching eagerly for the gleam of her white dress upon the steps and as he opened the gate she went down the path to meet him.

"What will I do when you are gone?" Antonia questioned whimsically, but she was surprised to feel her heart pause, waiting for his answer. It was a sensation so new and yet so old that she wanted to grasp and hold it.

They were walking together in the dark old orchard under the dark old trees whose wounds were already hidden and healing beneath the veil of heavy hanging leaves. Peter took her hand and held it gently. Her fingers clung to his for a moment as if the two hands waited for some signal; then they fell apart.

After a little Peter spoke straightforwardly as he had spoken on that unforgettable day a year ago.

"I can't do without you, Antonia. I've tried and found that I can't. I love you and I want you more than anything in the world, and if I can't have you I'm going where I won't see you for a long time."

"Until you get over it," she finished.

"I never will get over it,—until I learn to live without you, I wanted to say."

All at once she felt desolate. "Then it is true that every-

thing passes,—that nothing lasts. If—if—I loved you, my love would pass and yours would pass and we would find ourselves staring into empty space,—is that love, Peter?"

He looked earnestly into her eyes, "Love does not pass, my dearest." She could not see his face but she could feel the strength of him that some way sent a message from his heart to her own and peace, the answer to all that had been inexplicable, followed this. Peter had no gift of eloquence for himself, and they were both silent until they came to the boundary fence where they stopped for a moment before they turned back to the house.

"Love does not pass," he repeated. "It is we who change and grow older and wiser, and if we find emptiness when we look for our treasure it is because it was never there." He went on in a musing tone, "I can't remember when I haven't loved you, so how can I describe love when it has grown to be a part of me, like my body and my soul? And yet this is what I have to offer for the gift of yourself. It is so little that I am ashamed, but it is big enough to encompass the world for your sake."

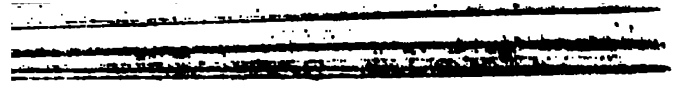
Antonia thought of all the people who had suffered from what they knew of love,—of poor Rose whose devastated heart bred madness,—of Cleve whose shallow self had taken the best of what it touched; of Dupagny and of the other figures in her little world, and suddenly she got a small, sweet vision of security and selflessness which Peter had been holding out to her and that she had been too blind to see. And in that moment her heart answered his with a warm responsive throb that drew the currents of their lives together. Her hands fluttered in the darkness like white moths and presently they were lying in his, tremulous but secure.

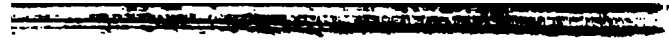
"It must have always been you," she said. "I never knew because you were so close to me, but now I know, and if you still love me like that—"

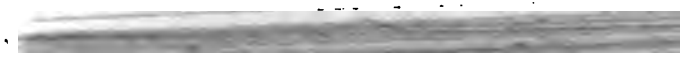
After they had passed on a deep stillness came upon the orchard. Under the bending trees, caves of intense shadow yawned emptily but beyond the white fence the radiant circle of blue white light teemed with life; millions of senseless insects whirling dizzily in a pursuit that never ended. The post where Donnie once was king now was half hidden by a flamboyant poster that announced a coming attraction at the Auditorium. The corner had taken on change as the world changes; a little coarsened,—made public by its bid for attention, like an article offered for sale and passing from hand to hand. The tree which once shaded it had been cut down and its bare stump was revealed nakedly in a little oasis of tangled grass and withered leaves.

It was the spot where Antonia used to wait in the velvet dusk to see Cleve pass, but she did not remember that now.

THE END







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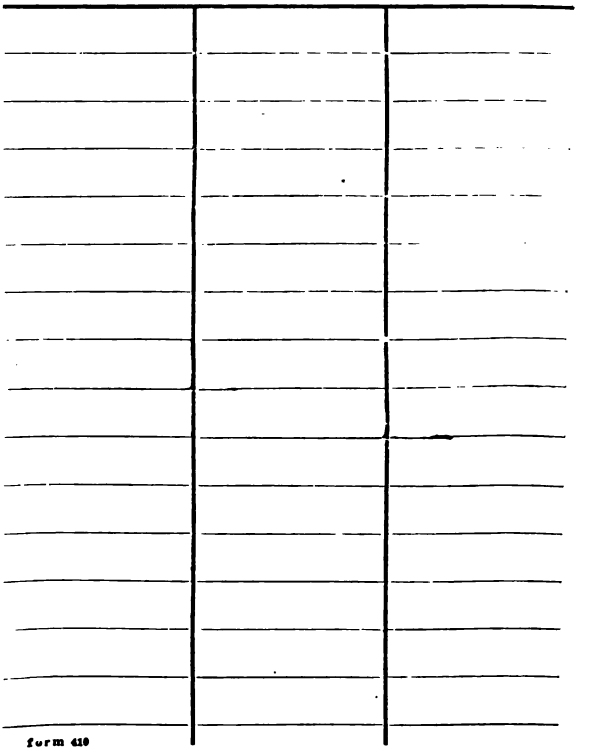
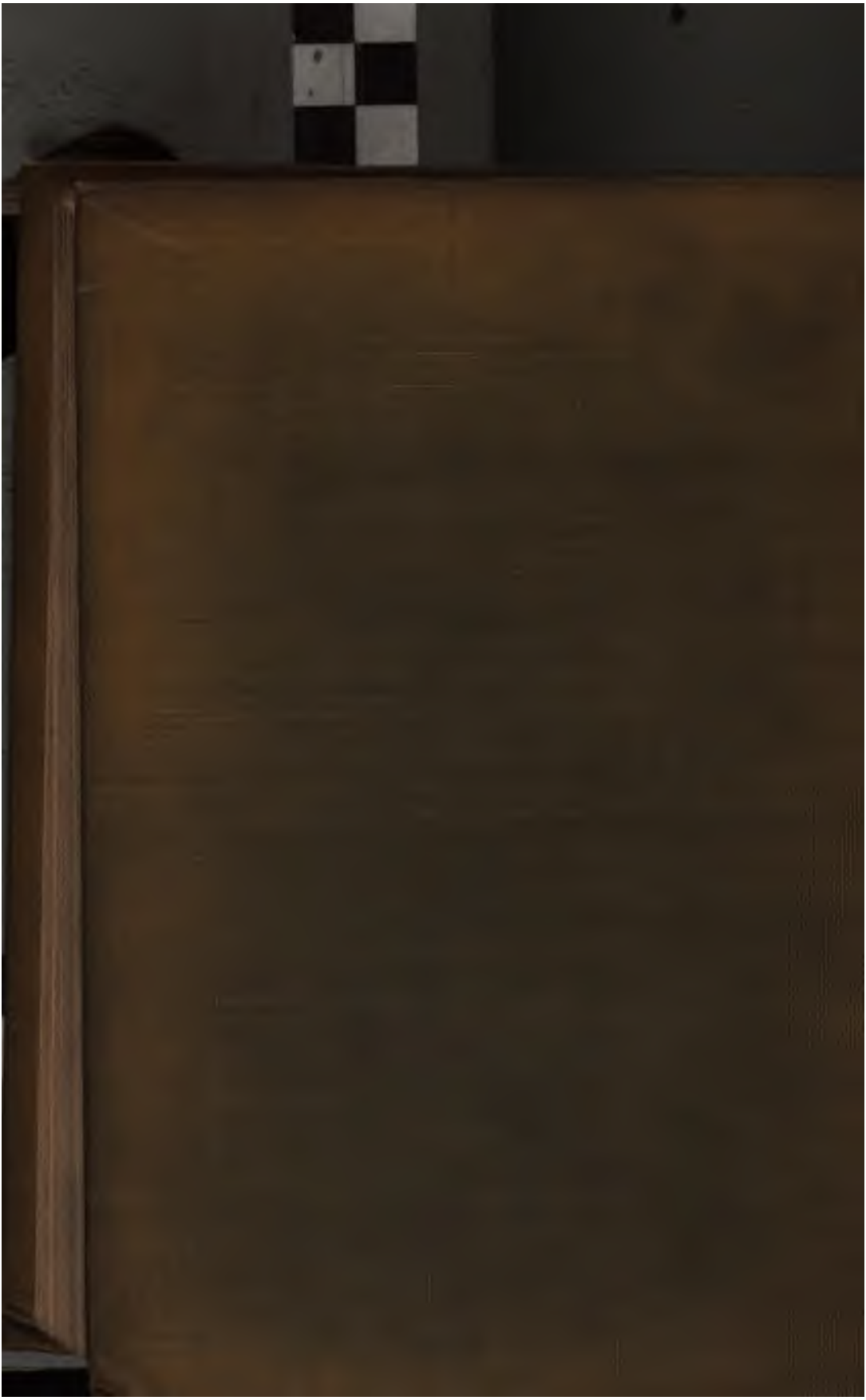
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